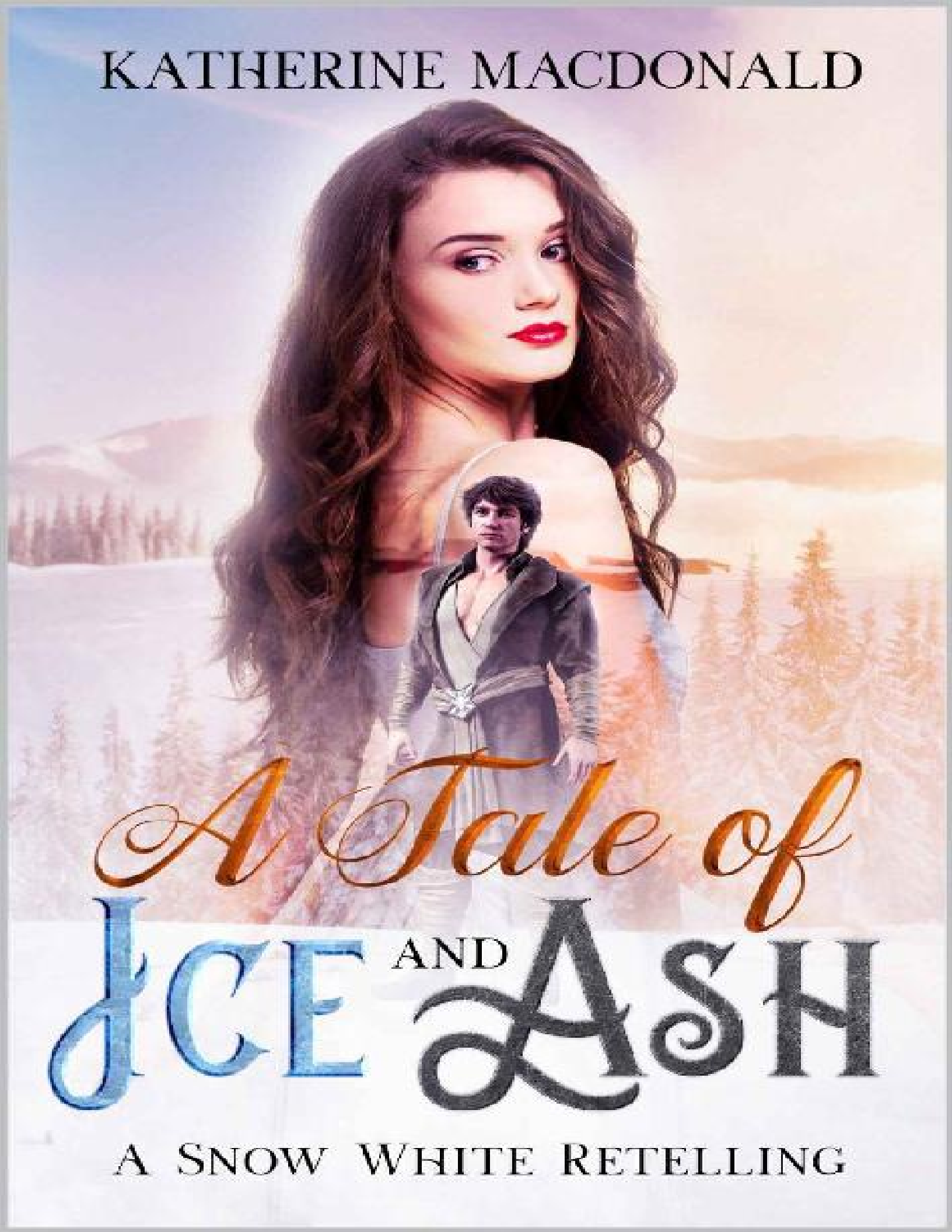
KATHERINE MACDONALD



A Tale of Ice and Ash

A Snow White Retelling

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"Snow White and the Seven Dwarves"

Based on the story by Brothers Grimm

Story source: *Household Stories* by the Brothers Grimm, translated by Lucy Crane and illustrated by Walter Crane (1886).



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Foreword

I had to do a Snow White retelling. I had to rescue this meek and passive heroine from her own tale. Like Sleeping Beauty, Snow White is powerless in the story, the action happening around her without her intervening at all. She has no choice and no agency.

In this story, Eirwen, while supported by her love interest and her colourful adoptive family, makes all the important decisions involving herself. She still has the kindness associated with her original character, but she is fair from meek and no passenger in her own tale.

The classic elements still remain; the mirror, the evil queen, the dwarves, the apple, and the enduring power of true love. It is a story for lovers of fairy tales who love the classic nature and beautiful imagery but long for true romance and enduring characters.

Long live fairy tales and fierce heroines, however that fire burns.



Part One:

There was a darkness, call it solitude,
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live
Like living men mov'd slowly through the mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.

--William Wordsworth--



Chapter One:

Into the Deep

There was magic in the world, once.

Magic that fell from the trees and swam in the oceans, magic that pulsated through the air and sparkled in the firelight. There were fairies and monsters and beautiful, ugly things.

Once upon a time.

But all that was now paper and ink, or buried under the earth, never to be found.

Or so her nursemaid had told her.

Remnants of magic still existed in the cold, dark world underneath the mountains of Aberthor. Eirwen could hear it hissing even now, rising up from the great stone belly rumbling beneath her. She had trod these ancient hallowed halls a hundred times by now, and yet the writhing thrill was always the same; the fear, the trepidation.

What will I see? What will I discover?

She dropped down into the hole, letting the rope fall through her fingers. Down she went, pressing through each rocky crevice, until she could go no further. Her boots touched the floor; crystal, just like the map suggested. She grinned, took out her pickaxe, and smashed against the surface. A few thrusts and it fell away. Faint, bluish light drifted through the gap.

Eirwen released a flare. A twenty foot drop? She had just enough rope left.

She descended into the hole, her eyes racing to adjust to the gloom as the flare fizzled.

She was inside a monstrous cavern. Even after all these years of exploring the ancient dwarven kingdoms, she was still struck by the sheer magnitude of them. She had lived in the shadow of the mountains her entire life, but never once had they ever made her feel so small.

This venerable place was old indeed; the sun stone –the giant crystals the dwarves used to light their homes– had faded to ice blue. The luminescent underground rivers gave off more light than the aged crystal. Some would have found the sight spooky, the great stone buildings standing so perfectly preserved beneath a dead sun, but Eirwen was transfixed. It was as beautiful as it was haunting.

She stopped to consult her map, looking for landmarks. She was not far off– the palace was straight ahead.

When her foster-father, Onyx, had first brought her down here, she'd wanted to paint it, wanted to capture some fragment of the beauty. She had since learnt two things.

One, she was a terrible painter.

Two, it was never good to stay too long in the same place.

She listened carefully, expanding her senses out as far as they would go, for a trace of anything murmuring in the dark. Cold quiet dripped into the cavern. Nothing. Good.

She rolled up her map, double checked the rest of her equipment, and proceeded up the road towards the castle. Even now, the red stone beneath her feet was smooth to the point of slick. There were a few collapsed buildings here and there, broken pillars, mounds of earth, but most of the city remained intact.

Usually, she'd begin looting, marking up places of particular interest for another journey, but not today. Something prickled in the stale, icy air, a feeling of unease, an invisible shadow. Was she being followed?

Shades don't follow you, she insisted. *If they were here, you'd know it.*

That didn't rule out another threat. Those twisted monsters weren't the only thing to be found in the deep.

Eirwen stepped carefully, following the path, trying not to let her gaze betray her thoughts.

She reached the palace, a chiselled marvel, a paragon of architecture. Despite their short stature, the dwarves made their palaces tall, although the thickness of the squat pillars holding up the impossible ceilings always brought them down a fraction.

Most of the palace had been picked clean of easy treasures, but she was searching for something else, a hidden room off the armoury, if her map was to be believed. Locating the armoury was easy enough, but the room was another matter. She traced her fingers over the walls, searching for an entrance. The stone on the back wall was cut oddly, not interlaced like the rest of the brick work. It wasn't the sort of thing you would notice if you weren't looking for it, but a tapestry might have been used once to add to the illusion.

Eirwen pressed against the wall. It did not budge, but it was always best to test the easiest options first.

She examined the rest of the room, testing the furniture, the fittings, each sconce attached to the walls. Finally, one of the candleholders clicked downwards. A lever. The room trembled; the back wall turned.

Eirwen's insides murmured. She loved this moment, when the pieces fell into place, when a new treasure was unearthed. She moved towards the new entrance, picking up an old tankard to toss into the space in case of traps.

Nothing happened. No spikes, no swinging axes, no poison darts. She didn't expect it on an item like this, benign in nature, valuable though it was.

There was magic in the world, once.

When, long ago, the Fey had shut the borders to their world and disappeared from the mortal lands, the dwarves rounded up any artefacts they'd left behind and brought them under the mountains for safekeeping. It made sense, as dwarves were immune to almost all types of magic. It neither harmed nor healed them. Or so Onyx said.

She stepped into the chamber. There were a few valuables stacked inside, bags of jewels and gold, ornate armour, a couple of chalices. But the piece she wanted took centre stage. A glittering necklace with a white gem at the centre, shining iridescently in the faint light. A curse-revealer. The stone turned black if the wearer was under one.

Even in a land with little magic, many a paranoid noble would pay handsomely for such a treasure, and even those that didn't know its true value would be seduced by the beauty of the jewel. The other loot paled in comparison.

Eirwen did a final check for any traps, stuffed her bags with a few handfuls of the other treasure, and went to lift it from its pedestal.

A thin shadow cut across her, sharp and silent. She wheeled around, drawing her blade. A tall figure in a dark cloak darted towards her. Human, by his size and stature, and alone. Nothing she couldn't handle.

A blade met hers, pushing her back a pace. He was strong, stronger than her, but then most of her opponents were. She slipped out of his reach, his swipes meeting only air. Stronger, he was, but not faster.

She kicked over one of the bags of gold, forcing him to slide in another direction, narrowly missing his middle with the tip of her blade. He was well taught, better than most common bandits.

His swordplay matched hers.

If she could snatch up the necklace and delay him with a swift kick, she could probably trap him. It would have to be a good kick to incapacitate him for long enough.

He swiped at her ankles, but she vaulted out of the way, sliding over a tabletop and snatching up the necklace. She slipped it around her wrist in two quick flicks.

"No!" the man yelled.

They had the same target. Definitely not a common bandit.

"Sorry," said Eirwen, "but ladies first."

She caught a hint of a smirk under his hood. "Usually, I'd agree," he said, making another lunge, "but not with this."

She let his sword slide all the way to the hilt of hers, grabbed the blade with the padded palm of her left hand, and twisted the hilt with her right. His grip loosened and she wrenched the weapon away from him, flinging it behind her. She pressed forward with her own, until her opponent was backed against the wall with her blade to his throat.

He gave a short gasp. "Snow?"

Eirwen stilled. There was only one person in the world who had ever called that, and he was one person that absolutely couldn't know she was alive. She opened her mouth to lie, to say he must be mistaken, but her hesitation had revealed everything.

He took down his hood.

Taller now than the boy she'd known when she fled the castle almost five years ago. He was at least nineteen. Paler, too, the years in the cold climate finally sucking the golden, olive lustre from his skin. His hair was still dark, though not quite reaching the ink-black depth of hers. His features were sharper, more chiselled, handsome in a way she never truly recognised as a child. His eyes, though, his eyes were utterly unchanged, dark as peat, fathomless. The kind the ladies at court had said they could get lost in.

Not her, though. Never her.

"Cole," she breathed.

A smile twitched in the corner of his lips. "Is it... is it really you?"

"Surprised to see me alive?"

"I would say so, yes."

"Here to finish the job?"

His brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play me for a fool. Your mother tried to have me killed."

He snorted. "Wait, you're serious?"

"About threats on my life? Usually am."

"I... no. No, Mother would never do that. She... she had a huge funeral for you."

"She had a huge funeral for my father, too."

"You… you think she killed him?"

Eirwen raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

Cole shook his head. "No. No. She loved your father. He died in a hunting accident. There's no way that she–"

Eirwen scoffed. "You can't be such an idiot, surely? When two members of a royal household die in suspicious circumstances, that's not bad luck."

"But mother–"

"Is too much of a saint to get her hands dirty? You're right. She had someone else do it. Luckily

for me he grew a conscience before he could finish the job."

Cole gulped. "But why... why would she do that?"

"Gee, I don't know, *crown prince*, what could her reasoning possibly be?"

"You think she wanted you gone so she could rule?"

"Well, that does seem to be working out very nicely for her…"

Cole stared down the end of her blade. "I don't suppose there's any chance you could put that down, is there?"

Eirwen jabbed it closer.

"I see," he said. "Are you going to kill me, then?"

"I don't particularly want to," she returned. She'd never killed a human before, and she didn't want to start with someone she knew. "But if you tell your mother I'm alive–"

"I won't, I swear–"

"What are you doing here, Cole?"

"Looking for that," he said, gesturing to the necklace wrapped around her wrist.

"What for?"

"I have my reasons." His eyes twinkled. "Come, Snow, can't we just sit down and have a nice little chat about old times?"

"You and I clearly have very different memories regarding our time spent together." She huffed. "And don't call me Snow."

Something dinged in the great hall. Eirwen swore, dropping her blade away from him.

"Did you just curse?" Cole asked delightedly. "How unladylike. Daddy would be horrified."

She flipped his blade off the floor and handed it back to him.

"You're arming me again."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. Come. Quickly."

"What is it?"

"Did you seriously make it all the way down here without finding out anything about this place?"

"Um… my research might have been a *little* one-sided…"

Eirwen groaned. "I don't have time to explain this to you. Stick beside me if you want to live."

Cole followed her out of the room. "I don't remember you being so confident and commanding. It's very attractive."

Eirwen shot him an icy glare. "I was *thirteen*, and you are just as vile as I remember."

Cole shrugged. "You're not thirteen any more…"

She drew her blade back to his throat. "I will use this."

"Point taken."

They stepped out of the armoury and ascended the staircase into the main corridor. The sound from the great hall intensified, as did a low scuttling around them.

Damn, damn, damn…

"Rats?" said Cole hopefully.

"Quiet."

He was lucky to have made it so far down without encountering any resistance, but an utter fool for being so unprepared. Why had he come down alone, anyway? Surely he had an army of knights at his command–

"You going to tell me what's going on?"

"Ssh!"

She tried to gauge the direction of the sound. There were definitely a few in the great hall, but by the entrance? She wasn't sure…

"This way," she said, jerking her head. "Keep your sword drawn."

"Well, I wasn't about to put it away…"

Eirwen shook her head and crept out, slowly, carefully, not trusting her boots not to make a sound. She tiptoed across the marble, Cole following her with exaggerated steps.

Something scuttled across the entrance. Cole stopped. "What was that?" he hissed.

A problem. Another two followed it.

Should they make a run for it, possibly attracting more? Was stealth still the best option?

She rarely had to engage them, evading them wherever she could. It was Onyx's first rule of surviving down here; never start a fight. Do whatever you could to avoid confrontation. The shades appeared to have some kind of hive mind. Engage one, and half a dozen were on you before you knew it.

Something moved to the side of her, a wheezing, guttural sound chopping through the air.

Eirwen turned. A few feet away one of them stood with its lopsided form, its wide unblinking, milk-white eyes staring at her from its shrunken, pitch-black, oily skin. Once, centuries ago, it had been a dwarf. That much was still obvious in its short, stout stature and wide features. But something had happened to it, something no one understood. Some said they were dwarves that dug too deep into the pit, and saw something that they weren't supposed to. Others said it was a virus, that their black blood would twist you, too. No one knew.

What they did know was that they were strong, that they did not feel pain, that they did not stop unless you made them.

The shade lunged.

Eirwen darted backwards, letting it barrel into the wall and slashed across its neck, kicking it down to bleed out while another launched its attack. She vaulted over its back, streaming towards the others, cutting wherever she could and hoping Cole was smart enough to follow her. The entrance was swarming with them.

No, no, no…

She turned, flying back along the corridor as they flooded the space, into the great hall.

There were easily twenty. She had never faced so many before. The floor of the great hall was covered in shards of glass, multiplying the white, unending stares.

Cole's back slammed against hers.

"It appears we're outnumbered," he said. "I'm sincerely hoping you have a plan."

Eirwen's thoughts raced, her gaze bouncing across every surface of the room, every entrance, every item. A dozen tables, fifty benches, a broken throne, a chandelier–

"Toss me," she said.

"What?"

"Throw me into the air. High as you can."

Cole didn't ask another question. He linked his fingers together, she jumped on top of them and catapulted into the rafters.

High ceilings, yes. But the rafters were low.

She whipped out her hunting knife and flung it across the room, severing the chandelier. It crashed to the ground. It caused the momentary distraction she was praying for. Wasting no time, she seized the remains of rope and threw it down to Cole, hauling him onto the beam.

“Follow me,” she instructed.

Cole didn’t argue, although he wobbled clumsily behind her, his large feet, tall form and inexperience slowing him.

The shades were still distracted by the chandelier, or looking around for their prey as if they’d vanished into thin air. Eirwen moved quickly, reaching the end of the rafters and leaping back down into the corridor, sprinting towards the exit.

Cole was much slower. Too slow. Any second now, more would come, or the others would realise where they went.

Somewhere, deep inside her, there must have been a voice telling her to abandon him. Onyx or Wren would have.

But not her.

“Quickly!” she rushed.

She fumbled about on her belt and withdrew two clumsily wrapped spark stones, a roll of twine and a small explosive. She looped the twine over the rafters and ran a length of it outside the doors, reaching a safe spot just as Cole tumbled from the final beam and skidded out after her.

The shades turned. She struck her stones.

The beams exploded.

Not checking to see how much damage she’d caused, she seized Cole’s hand and dragged him down through the city streets. The wheezing and scuttling continued. They were not alone. They could not stop.

Her escape rope dangled ahead of them. She seized the end and flew to the top, Cole not far behind, but the swarm was catching up, swimming beneath him. If they grabbed the rope–

“Cole!”

She drove her hand into the hole, trying to tug him up, will him up, *faster, faster…*

His hand reached hers. She hauled him into the space, pushed him aside, and struck her blade into the rope. It fell away, any shades clinging to it crashing to the ground beneath.

The breath shuddered out of her, and she collapsed on the floor of the tunnel next to Cole, panting hard.

“So,” said Cole, after the sounds of the monsters below subsided, “mind telling me what on earth just happened?”

Chapter Two:

The Raven and the Dove

Eirwen was almost eleven years old when her father decided to remarry. She did not understand the politics of it, other than the fact that politics were involved, and that the marriage was 'not a love match.'

"No one could ever compete with your mother," King Olwen explained.

Eirwen's heart ached. "Poor Queen Bianca," she sighed.

"Why do you say that, little dove?"

"It must be sad for her to leave her country and everyone she knows behind to marry a man who won't love her back."

Her father laughed, patting her dark head. "Come now, I'm sure she's not put out at all. She arranged this marriage herself, and has been married before. It may be that no one will replace her husband for her, either."

Eirwen shrugged, unsure of how adults thought of things. "She has a son, doesn't she?"

"Yes, Prince Cole. He's a couple of years older than you. He'll be your new brother."

Eirwen pulled a face.

"Stepbrother then," the king corrected himself. "And don't pull a face at that. It will be good for you to have other children of your own station about."

"My station?"

"You won't be a child for much longer, dove. You can't be chasing around the servants' children forever."

"Why not?"

"It's just not how it's done."

"Why–"

"So many questions this morning! You should ask your governess."

Eirwen sighed, knowing the conversation had reached its conclusion, and doubting she would get a much better answer out of her governess.

When her nursemaid tucked her into bed that night, she asked her about it instead. Niamh was her second favourite person in the castle, after her father. It was Niamh who had raised her when her mother died not long after she was born, Niamh who soothed scraped knees and tucked her up each night with a tale or song from long ago. She had long light hair, unusual for Aberthinians, who were traditionally brown or black, and warm eyes that cast the impression of firelight. Although she'd looked after Eirwen all of her young life, she always tried to explain things properly.

"It's not seen as proper, love," she said, "nobles mixing with commoners."

"Yes, but *why?* Aren't we the same?"

Niamh kissed her forehead. "In the ways that matter, of course. But not in all of the ways. Prince Cole is more… your sort."

He did not seem like her 'sort'.

He arrived the next day in a fabulous carriage of gold and silver, in a royal procession unlike anything Eirwen had ever seen before. It went on for miles. Carts of jewels, exotic spices, fine

gowns, spools of painted fabric from faraway lands, silks and satins, furs and laces, perfumes from every corner of the world, furniture so bright it was like painting with sunlight. Eirwen, in the mountain kingdom of snow and ice, had never seen so much colour before.

The Queen stepped out first, and her father went to greet her. She was as radiant as her belongings, with a crown of dark-gold curls piled atop her perfect, elegant face and eyes like cut glass, blue-grey, stormy. Her high cheekbones were sharp and angular, and she was as pale as a porcelain doll.

She smiled dazzlingly when she beheld Eirwen.

"You are as beautiful as they said you were, child," she said, dropping to her level. "I am delighted to meet you. I am sure we shall become fast friends."

There was something in her face that Eirwen couldn't fathom, a frostiness beneath the veneer of friendliness. Something held back, a plastered emotion, a candle without a flame.

She's just new, she doesn't know you, you're imagining things.

Bianca turned back to the carriage, and gestured for her son to join.

He did not look anything like his mother. He was dark and olive skinned, with a pinched, sour expression, as though he'd caught a whiff of something unpleasant.

"Prince Cole," said Eirwen, dropping into a curtsey. "I am pleased to meet you, at last. Welcome to our humble kingdom. I am Princess Eirwen–"

"Ey-er-wen," he repeated. "Oh, is that how you say it? We were wondering."

"It's an old name," her father explained. "Her mother chose it before she passed."

"It means Snow," Eirwen added.

Cole snorted. "Figures. Makes sense. The snow princess of the land of rocks and ice."

Eirwen wasn't sure she much cared for his tone, but then he sniffed and sneezed into his flimsy cloak, and she decided that perhaps he was just tired from his long journey.

"We should go inside," said the king, clicking his fingers for attendants and taking his bride's hand. "You'll both catch your death out here. You grow used to the climate quickly, though. We barely notice it anymore."

"It doesn't always snow," Eirwen assured them. "Our summers are lovely."

"It *never* snows in Florin," said Cole. "It's warm all year round."

Eirwen wasn't sure what point he was trying to make, and decided to ignore him.

Cole's foul mood did not abate with rest. He was irritable all through supper, still sour in the morning, gloomy by the following afternoon, and downright miserable as the preparations for the wedding were underway. The only time she saw him remotely happy was during the opening dance when they welcomed the guests for the ceremony the next day.

But even then, he still found a way to be foul.

"Mother says I must dance with you," he said, offering her a hand. His lips were thin and his eyes looked anywhere but her.

"Oh, of course," she said. He pulled her roughly onto the floor.

"You're not a very good dancer," he commented after a couple of moments.

Eirwen tried to swallow her disappointment. "No, but I'm good at a lot of other things."

"Like what?"

"Um, archery, for instance. Sewing. I've been told I'm quite good with a rapier, too."

Cole scoffed. "You? With a blade?"

"Of course," she said. "Don't you practise?"

"Yeah, but I'm a man. Girls don't need that stuff."

Eirwen scowled. “In Aberthor, all royal children are taught swordplay.”

“What? You going to ride off into battle?”

“I don’t know,” she said, narrowing her gaze, “are you?”

Cole glared. “I’m done with this dance,” he said. “I’m going to find a partner who can actually do it.”

Eirwen watched him go, wishing he could take the sting of his words with him. He was not short of partners. Young though he was, he had a handsome face even then, and he was a skilled dancer, no matter his temper.

The next day, they departed for the temple at the highest peak of the mountain. The wedding party split in two, the women to one side, the men to another. The queen was whisked away to the hot springs to bathe.

Eirwen and her ladies attended on her, but the queen dismissed them all.

“I need a moment alone, if I may,” she said sweetly.

Her maids scurried away.

Eirwen went back inside and climbed into her gown. It was white lace, ribbons and pearls. She felt like a fairy creature from long ago.

The maids disappeared after she was readied, and she sat by the window, watching two turtle doves flutter about the snowy grounds. That was probably good luck, on a wedding day.

With nothing else to do, she donned her fur cloak and drifted through the snow banks, following their trail, not thinking about where she was going until she heard a high, clear voice singing a song in another tongue. It was beautiful, sharp and sweet, and belonging unmistakably to the queen.

The steam rose and parted, but Eirwen could not see her future stepmother. Inside, a figure with pitch-black hair sat in the pool, singing of love and wonder.

Did the queen wear a wig? Or did she have some ancient fairy trinket, that gave her the power to look as she did?

The song stopped. “Who’s there?” said the voice, the sharpness of it turning steely.

Eirwen bolted, ashamed of her prying eyes, and mentioned not one word of it to anyone.

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Things did not improve between her and Cole after the wedding. His sourness was not isolated to her. Indeed, every courtier, every servant, every person in the castle aside from his esteemed mother fell victim to his foul moods at one point or another. Eirwen had tried her best to be welcoming. She’d brought him lemon and honey tea for his cold, gave him a tour of the castle, told him the names of the nicest servants and pointed out the guards to avoid if you ever wanted to sneak down to the kitchens for a sweet treat after supper. He seemed thoroughly disinterested in making friends.

“I don’t think Cole likes it here very much, Papa,” she said one evening, as she sat alone with her father by the fireside.

Her father smiled and stroked her hair. “Give it some time, little dove. It is very different from what he’s used to, and it has been just him and his mother for a long time. He doesn’t know what it’s like to have a sister.”

“I don’t *feel* like his sister…” she said. The word was alien to her, foreign on her tongue.

“In time, I’m sure you will.”

The next day, his father called both her and Cole to the training grounds and equipped them both with swords.

"What am I doing here?" Cole drawled.

"What does it look like?" said Olwen, gesturing to his daughter.

Eirwen beamed, warming up her muscles and testing her gear.

Cole raised an eyebrow. "It's not fair to fight a girl."

"Don't worry," said Eirwen sweetly, "I'll go easy on you."

He snorted, taking the first lunge. She parried it, but was surprised by his speed and strength. He was definitely stronger than her. Not quite as fast, but almost. She avoided his next attack, deftly leaping out of the way.

Cole smirked. "Your footwork is fancier outside of a dance," he said.

"*You* try dancing in court shoes next time," Eirwen snapped back.

Olwen laughed.

Cole chased her over the ring.

"Come on, Snow Princess, stand and fight!"

"My name is Eirwen," she said. "And I will fight when I am ready."

He took another swipe. "And when will that be?"

He lunged overhead. She slid her blade up to his hilt and twisted, turning his own strength against him. His sword clattered to the ground.

"When I have the upper hand," she said.

Her father roared. "Well done, little dove," he said, coming over to pat her back.

Cole climbed to his feet, scowling. "That's not fair," he said. "I wasn't expecting it."

"Which is why you lost," said Eirwen.

"This was a dumb idea. It's stupid to fight against a girl. They're not strong enough so they have to employ crafty tricks."

"What's your point, lad?" said Olwen, stroking his beard sagely. "Wouldn't you like to learn those crafty tricks too?"

Cole pouted. "Yes," he said, "but not from *her*."

Olwen laughed again. "Very well. Eirwen, you're dismissed."

"But–"

"We'll talk later, dove. Be on your way now."

Eirwen threw down her sword and huffed back into the castle. Her foul mood remained all through the evening, amplifying when Cole smirked at her at the dinner table, his bandaged hands telling a tale of a long day of training with *her* father.

Olwen came to see her before she went to bed.

"Why did you do that?" she stomped.

The king lowered himself to her side, and sighed when she jerked away from him. "The boy was embarrassed. I felt bad for him."

"He *should* be embarrassed."

"He wanted to be better."

"I could have taught him that."

"You could, maybe. If he was willing. But he wouldn't have been. He'd have been unhappy. I want him to be at home here. And… the boy didn't have much of a relationship with his father, and... I felt bad for him."

"I never knew my mother," Eirwen stropped, "I'm not mean to people because of it."

“That is because you have a kind heart, Eirwen, and not everyone is so blessed. People feel things differently, act differently because of it. People with kind hearts need to show them another way.”

“Kind hearts don’t sound very useful,” said Eirwen, burying herself in her pillow. “It sounds like kind hearts were meant to be broken.”

“They are a little easier to hurt, perhaps. But I still think it’s better to feel.”

“I don’t want a kind heart.”

“Then wrap it in steel,” he said, stroking her back. “But only to keep it safe.”

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Eirwen tried to be nice to Cole. She let him have his private lessons with her father, let the two of them go on private hunting trips, walk together about the grounds. It wasn’t like Olwen never made time for her. He still asked over her lessons daily. He still oversaw her training. He still sat with her, late into the evenings, telling her old stories as he stroked her head. It changed nothing between the two of them.

But nothing between her and Cole really changed either, and Queen Bianca remained distant and aloof, descending on Eirwen only when a ball was arranged and she wanted the opportunity to dress her up.

Eirwen could not get a read on Bianca. She didn’t understand her. She had always been quite *good* with people. Most, she knew, were good at heart. If they were bad, it was because they were upset, or in pain, or angry, or had something going on beneath the surface. Only a precious few were truly black-hearted, and thankfully Eirwen didn’t have much experience with them.

Bianca was different. Eirwen had seen her go from praising the cook to snapping at the serving staff in the same breath, like a dark cloud had swept away her kindness. She’d see her yelling at the maids and then crooning over Cole. Two different people, neither quite who she was. There was something false in her voice, something brittle and strange, like a clockwork doll in need of winding. She *had* to be human, but sometimes Eirwen wondered if she was composed of cogs and gears.

She could not tell her father. That would be rude, insulting his new bride. And she didn’t want him to think she was upset. But she asked Niamh about her once or twice.

For the first time, Niamh had no answer for her. “I haven’t quite wrapped my head around her either, princess,” she said. “Maybe she just needs some time to settle in.”

That was her father’s response whenever Cole did something snide or cruel. Just give him time to settle in. He’d stopped turning up his nose so much at the servants and complained less about the cold, but he took every opportunity to tease her. He only ever called her Eirwen when someone important was watching. Every other time, she was Snow. Tiny, inelegant, silly Snow, with two left feet and her head in the clouds. Classes together were a nightmare. Cole had a way of managing to make every sly remark appear charming in the ears of anyone who overheard. The ladies at court fawned over him, treating him as a prized pet, to begin with, and then as something else as he matured. He was one of those boys who looked older than his years, who towered over all of the girls by the time he hit fourteen and whose dark eyes and sharp cheekbones held them all captivated.

Eirwen found nothing enchanting about him, tolerating his presence only for the sake of peace at the dinner table.

Cole was insufferable almost every day until the accident, and silent almost every moment

afterwards.

Eirwen remembered everything about that day, as though it were etched into crystal. She was sewing beside the fire in the great hall when she heard a loud commotion from outside. There were cries to open the gates, shouts, desperate screams.

She could see nothing from the window. The first true notion she had of how serious things were was when Cole, now almost fifteen, burst through the doors. His face was white as paper and splashed with blood. There was blood on his cloak, blood on his face, and a dark, palpable fear in his eyes.

"The King, the King is hurt…" he blubbered, clutching at his mother's dress. Red bloodied the fabric, streaks of scarlet amidst the gold brocade. "Olwen, Olwen he… there was… a wild boar, he…" His eyes fell to Eirwen, and sound slid away from him.

The Queen shot up, leaving her son on the marble. A dozen servants followed her out.

Eirwen stood numbly in her place, her gaze still rooted on Cole. He sat in a pile on the floor, staring at bloodied handprints he'd left there.

Eirwen stepped towards him. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

Cole shook his head.

"Are you all right?"

He looked up at her sharply, as if he couldn't believe the words she'd just uttered and had no idea how to answer them.

"Cole?"

"How… I…"

"Sit by the fire," she said. "I'll send Niamh down for you."

In hindsight, she wished she'd stayed herself. Not for him, never for him, but to give her something to do, other than pace outside her father's room, waiting for the physician's verdict, her hand caught in Bianca's vice-like grip as she coughed out tearless sighs.

A facade. A lie. Everything Bianca did.

After hours, the physician finally exited the room. He had stopped the bleeding. He could not yet tell whether or not he would live, but when Eirwen went in to hold his hand, he squeezed back, with all the strength she knew him for. She was sure, in that moment, that he would be fine. Her father would not leave her.

When she woke the next morning, it was to Niamh's white, wretched face, and she knew, without her having to utter a word, that her beloved father was gone.

He had uttered no last words. She did not know if he'd even regained consciousness. All she knew was that the world was different now, colder than the harshest of winters, and this giant warmth had been extinguished forever.

She did not cry during the funeral. Bianca wept profusely. Cole could barely contain his sobs. Eirwen, meanwhile, felt like she'd been frozen, like any warmth that once sat inside her chest had vanished forever. The light of the fire passed through her like a ghost. Even Niamh's touch was like a whisper.

She never wanted to feel again.

Chapter Three:

The Home of the Dwarves

"So, someone –you won't say who– took you out into the woods, told you my mother wanted to kill you, set you free instead and you've spent the past five years living with a family of dwarves in a location you will not disclose?"

"That's correct."

"And these dwarven benefactors of yours have taught you the ways of the Underground, including how to fight these twisted dark cousins of theirs?"

"We call them shades."

"Shades. Right. Why don't more people talk about them?"

Eirwen shrugged. "Not many go Under the Mountain, Cole."

"I'm starting to see why..."

He squinted ahead, covering his eyes as the daylight from the end of the tunnel crashed against them like an avalanche. Eirwen blinked as her sight readjusted. They were back in the forest, clear golden skies overhead. It was almost evening. The others would be getting worried.

She looked back at her reluctant companion. "What were *you* doing under there, anyway?"

"Looking for the amulet, like I said."

"What for?"

"I don't have to tell you everything."

"I just–" She scowled, resisting the urge to stamp her foot. "Why didn't you send someone to retrieve it on your behalf?"

"It's complicated."

"Good stories are. Confess."

"How about you tell me where you live and then I'll tell you?"

Eirwen bristled, backing away.

"Oh, *please*. I'm not about to tell my mother where you are, and even if I did, it wouldn't matter, because she *did not order your death*."

"Agree to disagree."

"She… your father died in a hunting accident, Snow. I was *there*."

"He died after that."

"The physician said–"

"He was going to recover," Eirwen insisted. "I held his hand the night before and I knew. And then he just… he just went. Something happened to him."

Cole turned his head away, folding his arms. "You're imagining things."

"Says the deluded prince."

"Oh– whatever!"

Eirwen walked on ahead.

"Wait– where are you going?"

"I'm leaving you."

"I don't know the way back! I used an entirely different entrance. Don't leave me here!"

"You're smart. Apparently. You'll work it out. Head north."

"Snow–"

"Stop calling me that!"

A voice called through the forest. The bushes rustled ahead. Two small dwarves, a boy and a girl, barrelled out of the undergrowth. They both barely reached her hip.

"Eira! Eira!"

They were identical in height and similar in appearance, with wood-brown hair, hazel eyes, and features almost mirrored. She was glad Ivy had recently grown out her hair; it was hard before to tell them apart at a quick glance.

Juniper reached her first and smashed into her middle. "You're late! Did you get it?"

Eirwen grinned, flashing her wrist.

"Pretty!" Ivy's eyes glinted.

"We should get back," said Juniper, seizing her hand. "Da's getting worried."

"Da?" Cole frowned.

Ivy gave a sharp gasp, as if only just noticing Cole. "Oh, hello…" she said, her eyes wide and luminous. "Who are you?"

Cole dipped into a bow. "Prince Cole, sweet lady, an old friend of the princess'."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"It is a pleasure to meet you."

Ivy giggled, while Juniper pulled a face. He tugged Eirwen's hand harder. "We need to *go*!" he insisted.

"Well, you heard the boy," said Eirwen, turning to face Cole again. "I must leave you here to fend for yourself. I'd say it's been nice to see you, but I'd be lying."

Cole chuckled. "I don't remember you being so funny."

"I'd say the same thing about you, but I still don't find you amusing."

Cole bent his head back and roared, reminding her, just for a moment, of her father. He too got lost in a laugh. Cole recovered quickly, bending down to pull her into his arms. He really was far too tall.

"It was good to see you again," he said. "And I won't tell Mother about you. Promise. Take care, Snow."

He squeezed her hands, and took off into the dense pine forest.

"My name isn't– I still don't like you!"

He raised a hand in farewell, shot her a gleaming smile, and disappeared into the trees.

Ivy sighed. "Who was *that?*"

Juniper looked appalled. "That was *Prince Cole,* you absolute log! The son of the person that tried to kill Eirwen!"

"But he's so pretty…"

Eirwen shook her head, and slipped her arm around Ivy's shoulder. "I think we need to have a little talk about your preferences. Maybe reread one of those books Mama Gee bought for you? 'The Charming Prince is Not Always Charming', I think."

"*That* one seemed charming, though…"

Juniper and Eirwen both pretended to retch.

"Come on," said Eirwen, "let's go home."

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They walked together through the crisp forest, through dense pines and the redwood grove, lit up like a firecracker against the golden sky. The sun had almost dribbled away entirely by the time they reached the homestead.

The main cottage was lit up and glowing, the smell of a rich, warm stew bubbling through the air. Oakley's clinic stood still and quiet, fresh herbs strung up outside the window. Merry was brushing leaves from the porch of their small hut that sat behind it. Apple the pony munched hay in his paddock, snorting for attention as the three of them passed by. Eirwen stopped to pat his muzzle.

Garnet, a dumpy, middle-aged dwarf with nut-brown curls and a warm smile met them on the steps of the cottage. She gave the twins a pat and ushered them inside, before glancing at the mud splattering Eirwen's attire. She sighed, wiping her floury hands on her apron.

"You're a mess, child."

"Maybe," said Eirwen, her eyes large and wide, "but I'm your mess."

"That you are. Go round the back and wash up before dinner."

"Round the back? It's winter! I'll freeze to death."

"It is still autumn," she insisted. "And you will not."

"Fine," Eirwen pouted. "This dinner better be worth it!"

"What are you saying about my stew, child? It's always delightful!"

Eirwen stuck out her tongue, and did as she was instructed. Wren, a proud dwarven huntress, met her by the pump. She was darker than the rest of the family, with brown skin, black eyes, and braided hair the colour of night. She was the only one not related by blood or marriage, which, in a way, gave her a kinship with Eirwen. Decades ago, long before the twins were born, she'd sought shelter from a bitter storm, and had never fully left. In almost five years, Eirwen still knew only a handful of things about her.

"You have a bit of blood on you," Wren said.

Eirwen cast her eyes down Wren's attire. "So do you."

"Run into trouble?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

Without waiting for permission, Wren unbuckled Eirwen's equipment whilst she scrubbed her hands, approving of the pouch of gems and coins. She took her sheaths and blades.

"You're down a hunting knife."

"Sorry."

"No matter, this loot makes up for it. I'll wash your blades for you."

"Thank you."

"Hurry up and get to the table. You don't want to keep Garnet waiting."

"What about you?"

"I can survive her wrath."

"What about Onyx's?"

"His too."

Inside the cottage, Juniper and Ivy were setting the table for eight. Merry had joined Garnet in the kitchen and was helping her spoon out the bowls. Oakley and Onyx were already seated, the latter puffing on his pipe vigorously.

Onyx was as old as the mountains and almost as weathered. His once-black hair was now dark silver, his skin beaten and leathery beneath his whiskers. Only his eyes had any gleam left in them. His brother, Merry, was younger by a great deal, his skin not wrinkled to the point of pruning, his hair

still mostly dark and his eyes bright and sunny. The only thing rough about him was his hands, from the years of building, carving and forging.

Onyx tapped his wooden leg on the floor, gesturing for Eirwen to sit. It was one of Merry's creations, a polished piece of oak fashioned in the shape of a regular foot, but engraved with ancient dwarven markings. He never hid it with a boot or sock.

Eirwen sat. Ivy kissed her father's cheek and slid in beside him. Juniper did the same next to Eirwen. Garnet and Merry dished out the bowls, and Wren came in to take her place. She poked Oakley in the ribs and asked him to pass down the bread.

Finally, Garnet and Merry took their places, and the meal began in earnest.

Oakley chatted about a new ointment he was experimenting with, while Merry praised his husband's cleverness. Garnet quizzed the twins on what they'd learnt that day. Wren tried to enthrall everyone with tales of her latest exploits in the hunt for the white stag, but they fell largely on deaf ears.

"And what of you, girl?" barked Onyx. "How has your day been? My children inform me you ran into an old acquaintance. Should we be worried?"

Eirwen bit her lip. She'd been hoping to avoid talking about Cole. She didn't want anyone to fret over her, and the truth was, she *wanted* to believe Cole was telling the truth, that he'd keep her survival a secret.

"I think we're fine," she said.

"Good. Where's the trinket, then?"

Eirwen raised her arm to finally unlatch it from her wrist, only it wasn't there. Dread, anger and frustration gripped her. *Cole.*

Something in her face must have registered.

"No need to worry, eh?" Onyx shook his head. "Oh dear, girl…"

Eirwen swallowed, her throat tight. "See, Ivy?" she said. "Not all princes are charming."

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Cole snuck in through the servants' quarters, like he often did of late. There was far too much fanfare and fuss if he tried to enter through the main doors, and everyone had to bow as he passed by. As a boy, he'd enjoyed that, enjoyed the power of his mere presence, but lately…

He didn't know precisely what had changed. It had been a slow, gradual thing, like his mother's shift in temper. In his youth, she'd been patient and reserved, kind almost to a fault. It was hard to think that the same gentle fingers that had hovered over his, teaching him the piano, had slashed a servant's face two weeks before.

His father used to accuse her of being too kind to them. Now, she was the exact opposite.

It got worse after Olwen had died. Whatever Snow said, it was plain to Cole that his mother had loved the king. Her tears had not been for show. Cole knew because he'd heard her sobbing late at night, with no audience around her. Something about his death had shattered her, snipped away something of the person she once was.

She had not cried at all after his father's death, but then, he hadn't shed many tears either. He was ashamed to admit that losing Olwen was harder on him, too. His own father had been distant and reserved. He went quiet whenever he walked in the room, as if Cole were a stranger invading in his home, a nuisance that he had to put up with.

When he died, Cole had been sad, but mostly he mourned for what had never been alive to begin with.

Olwen was different. Olwen had tried from the moment he arrived, had made time for him, looked him in the eye, taught him things, spoke to him about everything and nothing.

The people of the kingdom regarded him as a weak king, too gentle and out of touch with the common folk and the problems of the kingdom, and perhaps they were right. But of one fact, Cole was sure: Olwen had been a good man. He wanted him to be his father.

Footsteps sounded down the corridor. Cole stilled, wondering if he should duck into a room to avoid a confrontation with a poor servant. Once, they'd looked at him and his mother with respect, but ever since she'd become so unpredictable, that respect had shrivelled to fear. A fear mirrored towards him. He used to flirt with the maids, but now they turned their heads away when he entered a room, as though his gaze could cut them.

Before he could make a decision, a fair head and a bright smile appeared at the end of the corridor. Niamh. Snow's former nursemaid. He'd been a bit too old for one by the time he arrived in Aberthor, but she fussed over him in a similar fashion, and was one of the few servants who hadn't changed towards him.

"Niamh," he grinned, "you're looking as lovely as ever."

Niamh sighed, shaking her head. "I'm over twice your age, I'm bony and greying, my hair's a frank mess and I haven't had a proper bath in weeks. What, pray tell, makes me *lovely?*"

"Your smile," he told her.

Despite herself, Niamh chuckled. "You're a rotten flirt. It'll get you into trouble one of these days."

"Maybe. But it'll get me into an awful lot of fun in the meantime."

"One day you'll meet a girl that doesn't fall for your charm, and I can't wait to see how that goes."

"Not fall for my charm? Niamh, you wound me."

She glared at him, her gaze sliding down his clothes. "You're a mess. Any point asking where you've been this time?"

Cole shook his head, grinning slyly. Niamh tutted, and held open the door to his room.

"In you go, Your Highness. I'll have some hot water sent up for you."

"You're a star, Niamhy."

Niamh stilled, just for a second. He didn't often call her that. Snow did. Was it meeting her today that reminded him?

Niamh mourned her like a daughter. Niamh deserved to know. Niamh would never tell his mother– and he'd only promised to keep it secret from her, after all.

But… if there was any chance Snow was right, and his mother found out…

He bit down his impulse. It was not worth her life.

"I am far better than you deserve, it's true," she said stiffly, sweeping past him. "Go on, get yourself cleaned up before your mother sees you. She'll have a fit."

That probably isn't far from the truth, he thought, stepping into his chambers. He tugged off his filth ridden boots and left them beside the door, pulling off the rest of his clothes. They were covered in muck and filth and a healthy coating of spiderwebs. It was just as well only Niamh got a good look at him.

He pulled on a new shirt, black trousers, and a short, midnight-blue tunic with a silver hem. He sometimes missed the colour of Florin, but the style and palette of this wintery kingdom certainly

suited him.

Niamh knocked on the door, bringing a basin of hot water. He washed his hands and face and took the necklace out of his pocket.

"That's lovely!" said Niamh. "Where did you get it?"

"A secret," he said, winking. "Do you think mother will like it?"

Niamh's face dropped. "Well, she does like shiny things."

"Niamh? Did something happen while I was out?"

"She… dismissed another servant. Annie."

Cole thought he knew her. Small, young, quiet. The sort frightened of her own shadow.

"What happened?"

"She said she didn't like the way she looked at her."

Cole sighed. They all looked at her that way. "I'll… I'll talk to her," he said, clutching the necklace in his grasp. "I'll do *something*."

Niamh smiled faintly. "Thanks, Your Highness."

She bobbed out of the room, and he tried not to dwell on the fact she used to call him Cole.

He cleaned and dried the necklace, and headed to his mother's room. She was talking to someone inside, but he could not hear another voice. He was not surprised when he entered to find her alone. She was often talking to herself.

She stepped away from the mirror where she'd been admiring herself, her face breaking into a smile. She was a beautiful woman, with flawless, dewy skin far too young for a woman of her years. Her eyes were sharp and grey, her hair gold and fine, like spun silk. She looked nothing like him, a fact everyone was aware of, especially as his father hadn't looked much like him either.

"Cole, darling," she said, coming forward to embrace him. "Where have you been?"

"A secret." He smiled. "But I have something for you."

"A gift?"

"Yes. Perhaps you're in need of one, after today?"

She raised a singular eyebrow.

"I hear you had some trouble with one of your servants?"

"Oh, that. Yes. Silly girl kept dropping things and looking at me strangely. You know that way, that some of them just *look*?"

As if they're terrified? "I have an inkling."

"Yes. Anyway. She had to go."

"Annie, was it?" He was trying to conjure her image. Was she the small, dark one? Pretty, beautiful eyes. She'd been at the castle for two years. He didn't know much about her family, but if she was willing to work for his mother… she'd have to have a good reason.

He cursed himself for not knowing more about the situation. Snow would have known. She knew everything about everyone.

His mother waved a hand. "I don't know."

"Did you give her severance wages, at least?"

"Of course not, dearest. It was the girl's own fault."

Cole shouldered the bitterness rising on his tongue. He'd have to slip her something before she left, or have Niamh deliver it in his stead.

"If you say so," he said quietly, not wanting to agree, but knowing the futility of arguing. He withdrew the necklace from his pocket, his palms hot. *Please work.* "For you, Mother," he announced.

The queen's eyes gleamed. Why was that the only time he saw such passion in her gaze, when it caught the light of a jewel? "It's beautiful," she said. "Wherever did you find it?"

"A secret," he said. "Shall I?"

She turned back to the mirror, lifting her hair for him to slip it round her neck. His breath hitched as it fell against her skin.

Turn black, he begged it. *Work. Be real. Tell me she's under a curse, that she's not really like this, that something else is at play.*

The white, pearlescent stone glared at him, and it took everything in his power not to crack right there.

"Cole, dearest? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing, Mother, only I'm not sure it does you justice."

She tore her gaze from her reflection to pat his cheek. "You are a sweet boy. The finest treasure in my collection. Are you hungry? Shall I send for some food?"

Cole did not want any servants subjected to her unnecessarily, and any appetite he'd had had vanished once his hopes had shattered.

His mother was not under a curse. She was truly everything they said she was.

What was he going to do now?

Chapter Four:

The Unexpected Guest

Her father's death shrivelled Eirwen. Her appetite waned, her body shrunk, her hair lost its lustre. She remembered little about the time between his funeral and her leaving the palace, like she'd become a ghost herself, drifting through the walls of that lifeless, empty place. A broken instrument, a songbird without its voice.

Sometimes the servants would leave apples in her bed, when another meal was left uneaten at the table. Food tasted like paste.

One morning, some time in early spring, her stepmother looked at her across the breakfast table.

"My dear child," she said, her voice like clear glass, "I do hate to see you waste away. You are so pale and sickly-looking. Why don't you go and pick flowers in that beautiful meadow beyond the stream? I'll have my huntsman accompany you."

Her loyal guard stepped out of the shadows. He was a mountain made human, tall and wide, strong as stone and just as severe. Eirwen had never seen him smile, but despite his stern appearance, she had never been afraid of him. His small blue eyes sparkled with kindness.

Eirwen nodded. She liked having a task, something to focus on, and if happiness was beyond her forever, it didn't matter what she did. She might as well pick flowers. It might make someone else happy.

"I'll go with you," said Cole, rising from his seat.

His mother shook her head. "No, dearest, you have dancing lessons this morning."

His resolve disappeared in an instant, his voice vanishing. He dropped back into his chair. Bianca rose and crossed the room, her skirts swishing darkly across the stone. She wrapped her arms around Eirwen. They were even bonier than her own had become, but there was something unnatural about them, like she was some kind of doll, a porcelain body on a frame of steel.

"I do hate to see you so depressed, my dear girl," she whispered coolly in her ear. "Wear a smile for me, there's a good child."

Eirwen tried, but the action was beyond her. Her muscles felt tight and heavy. If there was ever to come a time when she would smile freely again, she could not imagine it. It was a ghost of a future she could not grasp.

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The meadow her stepmother spoke of was awash with colour. Red, blue, purple and pink blazed amidst the tall, waving grass. The smell reminded her of summer, of Papa, of jam tarts and lazy afternoons, but it reached her as though through a haze; filmy, filtered, and as unnatural as the smile she'd tried to force.

She filled her basket within minutes, and floated to the edge of the stream. She wished she could be like water, drifting through the meadow, inactive, cold, unfeeling. She wanted to be carried

away to a land where she didn't have to think any more.

A raven on the bank opposite squawked. There was a flash of silver from the corner of her eye. Eirwen screamed –the first sound she'd made in days– and leapt back. A blade struck the soil beside her.

"Forgive me," said the Huntsman, collapsing in a heap. His thick, rough fingers clawed at the earth. "I cannot, I cannot…"

She gasped. "What… what are you doing?"

The man shook his head, his entire body trembling. "The Queen," he said, "she ordered me to kill you."

A chill struck Eirwen in the chest. She had never been close to her stepmother, but for her to want to murder her? She had done nothing to her, nothing at all–

"But… why?"

"You are heir to the throne, not her. She wants it for herself."

"But… I'm only a child!"

"You won't always be."

Eirwen swallowed. Her limbs were still gripped by fear. But for the first time in three months, she felt something. "I don't want to die."

The huntsman sobbed. "I cannot do it. Run away, sweet princess. Go somewhere she will never find you."

"But… where will I go?"

"Beyond the woods, there is a village," he said. "I cannot take you; she will be suspicious if I am not back soon. Go there, and stay there. Never return to this place."

He yanked his dagger free of the ground. Something twitched in the woods ahead. A doe.

"Go," he said. "I shall take back something else in place of your heart. Go, Princess, go!"

Something shifted inside her, and Eirwen found the strength to stand up. She started to run.

The forest closed in on her, the beaten path dissolving into sludge beneath her boots, the undergrowth snatching at her skirts, shredding the fine fabric, staining the lace black and muddy.

Colour was swallowed up, the brightness of the meadow far behind her stamped by black and brown and a green so dark it slid into the ground. Faint traces of dappled light illuminated great, shadowy shapes, monstrous tendrils clawing at her skin.

Gone were the trees, and in their place, ghouls and goblins forged of bark and leaf with sharp teeth and long, bony fingers. The forest creaked and groaned, slithering and hissing. Her heart burned in her throat, the bitter air choking her.

Was she going to die?

She could not turn back. The palace was no longer home. With a single order, Bianca had taken it from her, erased any warmth with coldness and dread. Home was death. There were only two options; stay and die or run and live.

Stopping would have been easier. Giving up would have been easier. She could curl up and let the forest take her, let the wild animals tear her flesh and let the bracken swallow her remains. It would be quicker than this slow death, this tortured, prolonged agony.

But fear kept her alive, just a little longer, even when night fell and the shadows sharpened, when every sound intensified to the point of a knife. Movement was everywhere and nowhere. She could not keep still, even though every muscle felt like it was on fire and she could no longer feel her limbs.

She took a dive, the ground skidding out beneath her, tumbling into a ditch. Pain blazed at her

ankle, her hands torn by thorns.

A shape rose out of the dark. The point of something silvery gleamed out of the gloom. A fang? A claw?

"Please don't eat me," she whispered hoarsely.

"I've never eaten a human before," said a deep voice. "Are you tasty?"

Whether it was the pain in her ankle, the lack of food and water, or the shock of the voice in the dark, Eirwen did not know, but a second later she lost all feeling, total and complete darkness finally closing in on her.

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She woke in the warmth, next to the glow of a roaring fire. Her hands had been neatly bandaged, and someone was tending to her ankle with rough but gentle fingers. Someone else was patting her hand.

"Is she waking up?" said a voice.

"Good. It can go once it's awake."

"Onyx! Be more gentle."

"You didn't marry me because I was gentle."

Eirwen sat up, rubbing her eyes. Five pairs of eyes fixed on her, each belonging to a very different-looking dwarf.

"It lives," said the grumpy one.

"How are you, dear?" said the one at her side. She had a warm, rosy face.

"I'm… I'm all right."

"What's your name?" said another. He was kind, cheerful-sounding.

"E...Eirwen."

"Pretty." He smiled. "I'm Merry."

"Eirwen?" said another voice. Dark-skinned, serious-looking. Taller than the others. Dressed like a hunter. Her voice matched the one from the woods. "Like the princess?"

"Just like that, yes."

"Must be a common human name," said the dwarf by her ankle.

Eirwen shook her head. "No. That's me. I'm the princess."

All five dwarves bristled.

"What," said the grumpy one darkly, "brings the princess this deep into the woods?"

"My stepmother," said Eirwen, as firmly as she could manage. "She tried to have me killed."

A couple of them nodded, conversing quietly amongst themselves. "That seems right," said the dark one. "You escaped?"

"Someone let me go."

"Go where, exactly?"

"I… I haven't worked that out, yet."

The motherly one put her arms around her. "Now, don't you worry pet, you can stay with us as long as you need to."

The grumpy one snorted. "It should go by morning."

"Onyx!"

"Oh no, woman, I know what you're like. First it's 'I'm just giving the stray cat a saucer of

milk' and the next thing you know, we have *five cats.*'"

"How was I to know she was expecting?"

"We have *five cats, Garnet!"*

"I don't think this one's going to multiply," said Garnet. "She's just a child. And she's all alone in the world…"

"No. No, absolutely not. Look at her. She's already bigger than we are. Give it a month and she'll be taller than the cottage. She'll eat us out of house and home–"

"I'll work for my board and lodging," said Eirwen quickly. "I… I don't know quite how, yet, but I can find something to do–"

"She's got archer's fingers," said the huntress. "I could always use some help getting game."

"No. *No!* Oakley– help me out here."

The one doctoring her ankle looked up. "Come on, old fellow. She's just a child."

"She can sleep with the twins!" said Merry. "It would be good for them to have another playmate."

"I can sew," Eirwen offered. She could think of nowhere else to go, and the cottage seemed warm and safe and cosy. The rosy-cheeked dwarf seemed nice, too. She reminded her of Niamh.

Niamh. Would she ever see her again?

"I'd love an extra pair of hands to help in the house," said Garnet.

"I'm a quick learner. I can do anything I put my mind to–"

"Watch it," said Merry, "he'll have you down the mines if you're not careful!"

"I don't mind. If it's helpful and it keeps me away from my stepmother–"

"Such a lovely child." Merry patted her head. "Come on, brother."

Onyx growled. "Fine. She can stay a week. But just the week. And that's final!"

Chapter Five:

The Second Stray

Almost five years later, Eirwen woke in the long bed Merry had made for her two weeks after her arrival. He had no idea quite how long humans were supposed to grow, so he'd made it twice the size of the twins' beds, only Eirwen had stopped growing two years after she came to them and was now left with an extra two feet of bed she had no need for, although the cats made good use of it. She and Garnet had stitched an extra long quilt for it, with scraps of white, cream, blue, red and purple. Eirwen had strung up gossamer around the frame when she found some in one of the caverns a few years back, plugging up the tears with blue embroidered roses; the flower of Aberthor. A snippet of home.

It was the only part of the cottage that reminded her of the palace at all. Everything else was bright and warm and red. For the most part, she liked it, but as she ducked under one of the low rafters and made her way downstairs for breakfast, there was a minute reminder that this place wasn't built for her, that she didn't belong as well as she pretended.

She punched the thought down. No. Wrong. Foolish. She belonged here, with her family. There was nowhere else she wanted to be.

Garnet was already up, cooking porridge in the large pot over the fire. Eirwen started diligently laying the table, just for five. Wren was already off in the forests, and Merry and Oakley took breakfasts in their hut by themselves.

Onyx glared at her as she dropped a bowl in front of him. She scowled right back. "You can't still be mad about yesterday!"

"Never underestimate Onyx's ability to be mad about nothing, dear," chirped Garnet from the kitchen.

"You let your guard down," Onyx snapped. "Next time it might not be for a pretty face–"

"Cole is *not* pretty," said Eirwen indignantly, although a little giggle from Ivy's corner of the attic served to prove her otherwise. "And l didn't 'let my guard down', he tricked me!"

"What happens if a *shade* tricks you, next time?"

"Shades can't–" Eirwen stopped, grinning. "Onyx, are you *worried* about me?"

"I wouldn't go as far as 'worried.' Concerned, maybe. Some of the others would be put-out if you died."

Any traces of anger vanished from Eirwen. She leaned across and planted a loud kiss on his leathery cheek. "You like me really."

"I don't find you as troublesome as I used to."

"You say the sweetest things."

"This is why you don't have any friends, girl."

"Don't need friends. Got you."

"You are disgusting. Go help your mother in the kitchen."

Eirwen stuck out her tongue and went to help Garnet dish out the bowls. She tried not to dwell on Onyx's comments about her lack of friends. He hadn't meant it to sting. He was right, though. Her only friends consisted of the seven members of her family. She had never really had anyone other than

Niamh close enough to miss from her life before, and she never went into the nearest village long enough to form any lasting friendships. All the bonds that once connected her to any fellow nobles had long since dissolved.

Well, all bar one. She still thought of Marie Van Transinberg every so often. She was smart and funny and kept hiding from balls in the library. She was the only person Eirwen thought of turning to in her exile, before thinking of the danger it would bring.

A low-hanging pan hit her in the face.

Was she honestly planning to stay here forever?

She'd always have a home here, of that she was certain. Dwarves aged far more slowly than humans. Juniper and Ivy would barely be adults by the time she was an old woman. Was that the course her life was to take?

But what other course was there?

Garnet flicked her nose. "You all right, pet?"

"Lost in thought. Sorry." She took two bowls of porridge and handed them to the twins. They grinned hungrily, digging in.

They had barely aged a day since when she first arrived, in stature or maturity. They had looked about ten when she was almost thirteen. Ivy had combed and braided her hair one night, a few weeks after her arrival, and they talked of dances and dresses and hair ribbons.

This is what it must be like to have a sister, Eirwen thought. *A friend.*

She was right on the first account, but Ivy was still ten in feeling if not in years. They had not grown up together. They never would.

"I'm going into the village today," Eirwen announced. "Do we need anything?"

"I'll write you a list."

She saddled up the horse and cart straight after breakfast and headed into the village. It was a two hour journey, but closer than the kingdom capital, and populated almost entirely by dwarves or other folk with so little to do with politics that her sudden appearance after the princess' untimely demise had never been questioned. They rarely talked about the capital at all, except to complain about taxes.

The first time she had visited, not long after her initial disappearance, she'd expected the gossip to be ripe with whisperings of her death, but no one had said a word. It was another three months before she plucked up the courage to ask, off-handedly, of news from the palace.

"Who cares about that place?" one person had sneered. "They don't care about us."

"Why do you say that?" she probed gingerly.

The seller in question spun a tale of the only time the king had ever visited. His horse had knocked over a basket of his produce. Olwen had muttered an apology, flung a coin at him, and continued on his merry way. The coin had not been nearly enough to compensate for the damage; the king had not thought to check.

Eirwen expected it to be an isolated incident, but it was not. Whenever she asked, there were stories of indifference, of carelessness, of unsettled bills from the palace or unanswered petitions. Too many to offer excuses for.

It took her a long time to understand that someone could be a good father, and a poor king. When she finally spoke of her sadness to the dwarves, they did their best to console her. Merry and Garnet said they were sure some of the stories were exaggerations. Wren and Oakely told her it didn't matter. Only Onyx's words offered any real solace.

"Some folk weren't built for politics," he said. "Doesn't make 'em bad people, necessarily.

Just makes them bad leaders." He reached out, as if to pat her head, but drew back his hand at the last minute. "If he was a good father to you, lass, that matters more than anything else."

Eirwen appreciated his words, although she would lose sleep years later wondering if it wouldn't have been better for everyone else if he'd been a great king and a terrible father.

Either way, she never asked for news from the capital now.

She hadn't been to the village in weeks. The price of flour and grain had gone up again, unsurprisingly, but she was able to afford it with the loot from yesterday's excursion. At least it hadn't been a completely wasted journey.

She bought some more supplies for Oakley, who was running out of some of the rarer ingredients he couldn't grow himself. She picked up some more fabric and thread too; her supplies were running low. With a little left over, she purchased a length of ribbon for Ivy and a new buckle for Juniper. Onyx would complain that she spoiled them, but he liked to see them happy as much as she did. He was fooling no one.

Returning after midday, she spent a lazy afternoon in the grove of apple trees behind the cottage, pretending to pick apples but mostly just eating them, before helping Garnet with the dinner while the twins folded laundry.

Merry and Oakley trekked in shortly before dinner, and the table was set.

"Anyone seen Wren?" Eirwen asked.

There was a wave of shaking heads, but no one seemed worried. Wren kept to her own time and could disappear for days on end. Eirwen set aside a plate for her for later.

Before she could take her seat, there was a hollering from outside.

Oakley and Merry bolted from their seats while Onyx grappled for his cane. Eirwen was first out the door. Wren was standing in the yard, faintly illuminated by the glow of the cottage, panting and wheezing.

"Wren! What happened?" Oakley grabbed her shoulders, checking for any injuries.

"I'm fine," she coughed. "But I accidentally shot someone. I tried to drag him back, but after a mile, even I was getting tired. Why are humans so unnecessarily tall?"

"Human?" Eirwen frowned, as Wren rushed out instructions of where she'd left her victim. Merry and Oakley went to grab the cart.

"Yeah, human."

"What did he look like?"

Wren shrugged. "All you humans look the same to me."

"Wren!"

"Oh, fine! It was getting pretty dark, but I guess he was pale and black-haired."

In Aberthor, that didn't really narrow it down, but a cold feeling gripped her. "Did he… did he say anything to you?"

"I mean, he complained a lot about being shot, and then asked if I'd seen any black-haired human girls."

"Like me?"

She shrugged. "Like I said, you all look the same to me…"

The sound of the cart clattered over the bridge. Eirwen raced over. Even in the dim light, she could clearly see Cole in the back, white-faced and immobile.

"Saints above, Wren, did you kill him?"

"No! I just shot him. And to be honest he made an awful fuss about it."

Eirwen climbed into the back of the cart, crouching down beside Cole and yanking away the

cloak covering his body.

"Cole, are you all right?"

He groaned, opening his eyes. "Will you think less of me if I say no?"

"I couldn't possibly think any less of you."

"Well, that hurts more than the arrow…" He clutched his shoulder. "No, I'm not all right, I got shot! I've never been shot before. On a scale of one to ten... it is thoroughly unpleasant. I do not recommend it."

She inspected the wound, parting the fabric around it.

"What say you, lady? Is it mortal? Am I not long for this world?"

"You're not going to die. You'll just be a bit uncomfortable for a while."

"Your version of uncomfortable is remarkably similar to my version of pain."

"Oh… toughen up."

"*You* toughen up–"

She grabbed the shaft of the arrow and pulled. Cole let out a low howl.

"I'm plenty tough," she grinned.

He seethed through gritted teeth as she tossed the arrow aside and pressed her hand to the hole in his shoulder. "You could have warned me!"

"It's better without warning, trust me."

Oakley appeared at the base of the cart. "You took the arrow out?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "You always make a mess of that."

"Make a mess?" Cole looked at her wildly. "What does that mean?"

"It's *fine,*" Eirwen insisted. "It's not a bad wound–"

Oakley tutted. "I'll be the judge of that. Come on, let's get him into my hut."

Eirwen hauled him to his feet, ducking under his good shoulder. Oakley held his waist at the other side as Merry hurried forward to open the door.

"Duck," said Eirwen.

"What?"

Cole's head hit the low frame of the door. "Ow!" he hissed. "Why is that door so low?"

"Gee," said Oakley, passing easily underneath it, "I wonder why, giant…"

They maneuvered Cole into a bunk. His feet dangled off the edge.

"Lucky you're so short, eh?" he said, grinning at Eirwen.

"Short on height, but not on wit, which is more than I can say about you."

"Come on, Snow. We all know I'm the funny one."

"Is 'all' just you in this scenario? Because you're the only one who thinks that."

"You smile at my jokes."

Eirwen fixed her features into the most solemn expression. "Only to keep myself from weeping."

Oakley tore Cole's shirt, heaving it off his body and casting it aside.

"Hey! I liked that shirt–"

"Do you like your life better?"

Cole's eyes widened. "She… she said it wasn't mortal–"

"*He* likes to exaggerate," Eirwen snapped, shooting Oakley a dark expression. "Hold still."

"What? Why–"

Oakley splashed something clear and cool over his wound. The flesh underneath the liquid

hissed.

"Ouch! Saints and spirits, do you *mind*? That hurts!"

"It'll kill off any infection," Oakley muttered, now probing the wound with a hot cloth. Merry went to stoke the fire. "Stay still, boy, I need to inspect the damage."

Eirwen got up and fetched a small vial of something from one of the cabinets. She brought it back to Cole's side and pressed it to his lips.

"Take this," she said.

"What is it?"

"It'll help with the pain."

"You couldn't have offered that to me *before?*"

"It's a waste on a minor injury like this," Oakley tutted, shaking his head.

"A minute ago you were trying to convince me that I was dying! Pick a mood!"

Oakley's fingers disappeared into his shoulder. Cole seethed, necking back the vial Eirwen had given him and then groaning against her shoulder. For a moment, she sat stunned, unsure of where to put herself, before Oakley yanked back his hand and Cole fell into her completely. He was a step away from whimpering, his fingers loose against her body.

"Are… you… always… this… rough?"

Oakley shrugged. "Dwarves are made a bit sturdier than humans, sorry," he said, not sounding remotely apologetic. "There's nothing in the wound that should cause you any problems. Minor muscle damage. Should heal nicely if we clean it properly."

He doused a nearby rag with some more of the solution.

"Let– let me," Eirwen said, tugging the rag free of his calloused grip.

Oakley held out his hands**.** "Suit yourself. I'll lay out needles and thread."

Cole removed himself from Eirwen's shoulder. "Are you going to do some sewing?"

"Er..." Eirwen grimaced.

"Terrific," said Cole, his face paling further. "This just gets better and better."

Oakley and Merry laid out the equipment, did a quick tidy, and then slipped outside together, leaving the two of them alone. They would doubtlessly be reporting back to the others. Onyx was not going to be pleased about this.

Eirwen took Cole's face in her hands. "Look at me," she said.

"If I absolutely must." His eyes settled on her. "Although, I must say, you are a lot prettier than I remember."

"I was always pretty. The only thing that's matured over the years is your taste."

His gaze dropped down. "Not quite the *only* thing…"

She pressed the cloth to his wound. "Eyes up top."

"I'll remember that when they stop rolling in my sockets…" He sniffed the rag. "What even is that?"

"Best you don't know. Now…" she caught his gaze again, "mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"I came to give you back the amulet," he said. "I… don't need it anymore. I figured you might still have a use for it."

"Did it not work?"

"Yes. It just didn't give me the answer I wanted."

So he knew what it was for, which meant for all his protestations that his mother *hadn't* ordered her death, he knew something wasn't right. "It… it was for your mother, wasn't it?"

He swallowed. “I… I hoped, that maybe–”

“I know,” she said. “You don’t have to explain. I understand. My parents weren’t exactly what I wanted them to be, either.”

“I liked your father.”

“He was likable. He just… wasn’t a great king, from what I understand.”

“I think my mother has moved beyond ‘not a great queen’.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to say anything…” She cracked her knuckles. “Hmm, that’s probably long enough.”

“For what?”

She flicked his wound.

“Hey, what’s– Wait. I didn’t feel that.”

“Drugs have kicked in. I can probably sew you up now. Let me know if you need to vomit.”

“What?”

“Common side effect.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned that before?”

“You still would have taken it.”

He groaned. “Could you be a little less right, at times?”

“Only if you’re a little less wrong.”

She pinched the wound. It had largely stopped bleeding by now; only a thin trickle still pervaded the flesh. She readied her instruments, threading the needle Oakley had sterilised.

“Lie down,” she instructed.

“There were easier ways of getting me into bed…”

“You’re vile,” she hissed, bringing the needle to his skin, “we’re technically stepsiblings, you know. Or were.”

“It’s not like we grew up together or share any blood at all, it’s not weird.”

“It is disgusting and so are you.” She pushed against his chest. “Lie still.”

“Are you not going to sing me a lullaby?”

“You know, I’m sure Oakley has something around here that can knock you out–”

“He will berate you for wasting his precious potions on a weak little human boy.”

“You’re right. Maybe I better just punch you unconscious instead–”

“You and the dwarf both have terrible bedside manners. You used to be such a sweet little thing–”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Well, not to me, obviously–”

“Are you noticing a common denominator in those situations?”

Cole chuckled, and placed a hand over the one pinned to his chest. “Thank you.”

“For… what?”

“For taking over from the dwarf. Something tells me you’re a *little* softer than he is…”

“You’re… you’re welcome. Least I could do after Wren shot you.”

“I suppose she’ll have to kill me in the morning, lest I reveal your location to my mother…”

“Cole–”

“Which, for the record, I have no plan on doing.”

“Why not?”

“In case you’re right,” he said. “Whatever… whatever I feel for you, I don’t want you dead. Arrowheads, needles and pain aside, it’s quite fun talking to you.”

“I’d return the compliment but…”

“Yes, yes, I’m vile and disgusting and you hate my guts.”

“I don’t hate you, Cole. You’re just not my favourite person.”

“Who is?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I mean, do you have a favourite person? Some beefy dwarven lover? A lone ranger? A tavern wench? A songstress with a voice like a siren?”

“I… are you asking if I have a lover?”

“I’m just trying to understand what you’ve been doing the past five years.”

“No lovers, I can assure you. It’s… it’s just us out here. Me and the seven dwarves. The occasional traveller, maybe. We don’t often go into the village. Only once a month for supplies.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“I live with *seven dwarves.”*

“But you aren’t like them.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What? Dwarven? Why would that make–”

“I mean, noble.”

“Like I care about that, either!”

He tugged on her fingers. “Don’t be cross. I just… I just meant… it must be hard for you, coming from where you came from, to these somewhat provincial circumstances. It must have been hard to adapt, and have everyone think you a simpleton or a fool for not getting things, or spoilt, or–”

“It was a long time ago.”

“I suppose so.” He sighed. “I did kind of miss you, you know. When you disappeared. I didn’t make that part up. It was dull in the castle without you. And the servants were sad.”

He turned his face towards his shoulder.

“Don’t look!” she snapped, seizing his chin and pushing his face away.

“Why? Is it bad?”

“No, I just don’t like people watching me when I work.”

“I’m feeling lightheaded... have I lost too much blood?”

“Don’t be melodramatic. It’s a side effect of the drugs I gave you.”

“Oh... would... would you think any less of me if I passed out now?”

She smiled. “No.”

“You’re smiling.”

“You’ll be better company when you’re unconscious.”

“You’re so kind, Snow...”

“One of my finer qualities.”

“Do I get a kiss goodnight?”

She glared at him, kissing a fingertip and pressing it roughly to his forehead. “Night, Cole.”

“Goodnight, Eirwen…”

Chapter Six:

The Huntsman

Cole woke under a weighted blanket, woozy and stiff but far from in pain. A chair had been added to the end of the cot to extend it for his size. Someone, another dwarf with wheat-coloured hair and rosy cheeks, was changing his bandages.

"Good morning!" said the dwarf cheerily. "You look brighter than you did last night. Cole, was it?"

"Um... yes. Thank you." He thought about mentioning his title, but he doubted she was unaware of it if she knew his name. It probably didn't matter to her, if she'd had a princess under her roof for half a decade.

"I'm Garnet."

"You seem a lot nicer than Snow and the other chap yesterday."

"Eira? What are you talking about, pet? She's a delight."

"If you say so."

Garnet beamed, and her gaze drifted to the corner of the room. Cole followed it to a chair beside the fire. Eirwen was curled up in it, sound asleep. Her black hair spilled out over the shoulders of a milk-white nightgown. It was frayed and tattered, but embroidered in places with tiny blue flowers. Roses. The flower of the Aberthinian Royal family.

She looked very peaceful sleeping, and a lot prettier than he remembered.

"She stayed with you last night, you know," said Garnet. "Although maybe she was worried Wren would come back and finish the job…"

Cole blanched. "Will she?"

"Ha! She didn't drag you through the forest for nothing. My husband might, if he thinks you'll tell your mother where Eira is."

"I wouldn't– I promise–"

"You can convince him later," Garnet said, patting him on the arm. She handed him his shirt. It had been meticulously mended, the stitches as small as... well, the ones in his shoulder.

"Get dressed, pet. I'll get you some breakfast together."

Eirwen stirred just after Garnet dropped off two bowls of porridge. She flashed him a faint smile.

"Good morning. How's your shoulder?"

"Better, thank you." He handed her one of the bowls, holding back a wince. She took it gratefully. "You mended my shirt."

"I didn't think any of the others we had would fit you."

"You did a really good job."

"Sewing is my thing. My talent."

"Other than beating me at sword fights?"

"You remember that?"

"Having my arse handed to me by a girl half my size? Pretty hard to forget."

Snow blushed. "I wasn't half your size…"

"No, but you're getting close to it now."

"Cole," she said. "Why are you here?"

"I told you. I came to give you back the amulet."

"No, I mean… why are you *still* here? You came of age well over a year ago. Why didn't you go back to Florin and become king?"

"Maybe I like it here."

She raised an eyebrow.

"It's complicated," he said. "And I don't feel like going into it just yet." He dug into his pocket and fished out the necklace that had been sitting in it since yesterday, tossing it towards her. "Are you going to sell it?" he asked.

Eirwen shrugged. "Maybe." She said. "Come… come on. I'm going to show you something."

She tugged his arm and drew him out of the hut and into a cellar underneath the main residence. Its roof was painfully low. Inside were various bags of grain, casks of ale and crates of supplies, but a corner was taken up with what must have been other loot from the mountain. There were small bags of gems, a few chalices, a couple of bracelets and a handful of rings.

Snow took out the necklace, fastened it, and shaped it into a circle. She moved one of the chalices inside the ring created by the chain. The stone at the centre blackened. She sighed, pushing it away.

"The necklace doesn't just work on people," she explained. "Objects can carry curses, too. I don't sell anything that isn't safe, or could be used for evil."

"How… how do you know all this?" he said. "About Under the Mountain, these items that have been lost for centuries…"

"Onyx, mainly. He's the leader here."

"How does he know?"

"Word of mouth? Old dwarven legends? Age? He's never told me."

Cole knew what it was like to live with someone with secrets. He didn't push it.

"What about you?" she continued. "How did you find out about necklace?"

"I first heard of it in a book–" he started.

"You can read?" Eirwen clutched her hands together in shock.

"Ah, yes, *that's* the Eirwen I remember. I've missed the teasing."

"Really?"

"No."

She scowled at him, which just made him want to laugh. Even knowing she could put up a fight, she looked about as threatening as a mouse. He wanted to poke her cheeks.

He carried on with his story instead. It was a safer option.

"Thought it was a myth, at first, but then there's always been a lot of rumours about Under the Mountain. I did some research, some digging, a *lot* of reading, poring through old maps and records. It took me weeks, months even."

"Are you trying to impress me?"

"Is it working?"

"No."

He snorted. "What does the chalice do, do you think?"

"I don't know," said Snow, testing the other pieces and sorting them into piles. "It could poison anyone who drinks from it, might just give them terrible hair. Not worth putting it out on the market."

"What about the other bits?"

"Not sure about most of them. The ring casts a fairy glamour, though. I'm not very good at using

it." She picked it up, sliding it onto her finger and turning the jewel in the centre. Her hair turned ice-white. "I should be able to transform into anyone, but either it's a bit broken or my imagination is terrible." She slid it off again and put it down.

"That's amazing! Why wouldn't you sell it? You could fetch a great price–"

Eirwen shook her head. "It might seem benign, but I'm not sure. You could do a lot of damage if you could wear anyone's face. I'm not sure that sort of power belongs in the world."

Cole stared at her. How was she still so *good,* this girl that had lost everything? If he was in her position, he would have mastered that trinket, stolen into the palace, made himself look like a servant and delivered a drink in that cup to the one he thought responsible for the attempted murder and the loss of her former life.

"What? What is it?"

"Just thinking about how fundamentally different we are."

"Oh, like how I'm a great person and you're not?"

Cole looked down. "Yes."

Eirwen pushed her hair behind her ear, her shoulders sloping uncomfortably. He'd made her feel awkward. He searched for something to say, but a sharp tapping penetrated the air, and a dwarf with a sour face and a wooden leg appeared at the cellar door.

"Still here, boy?"

"Umm, yes sir–"

"Eira! Why are you showing the boy our loot?"

"I hardly think he's going to steal it. He has a vault of treasure at his disposal."

"I do," said Cole readily, "I could swim in it, if I wanted to. Although, you know, a lot of it belongs to you."

"Me?" Eirwen blinked.

"You are the legitimate heir to the throne, or you will be, once you turn eighteen. Your birthday is only a couple of months away, isn't it?"

"I, er… I… I don't…"

"What?"

"I don't want it. I never thought… it doesn't matter."

Cole shrugged. "Oh well, I suppose I don't need to worry about you killing me in my sleep to cement your claim."

A wry smile glittered in the corner of her mouth. He wished you could tug on a smile, like he'd once tugged on her braids.

"Try not to tempt me," she said.

Onyx banged against the roof with his cane. "Come on. Be off with you. Your wound should be healed enough by now."

"Yes, sir." Cole nodded, shuffling out of the space, taking care not to leave his back exposed to the dwarf. His eyes were like daggers. "T-thank you, for your hospitality."

Onyx snorted, and hobbled off back to the house.

Eirwen grinned, following after Cole. "He's like that with everyone. I think I've had five smiles off him since I got here. But he's a sweetheart deep down. Deep, deep, deep down."

Garnet met them in the yard with a small packet of food. "For the journey back, pet," she said, handing it to Cole. "Wouldn't want you to get hungry."

"Thank you, that's very kind."

Two dwarf children peered out from behind her skirts. The girl giggled. He waved back,

causing her to blush furiously.

Eirwen looked good with a blush…

She pulled his elbow, pointing him in the direction of the short bridge over the stream. "Do you know your way back?"

"I think so. Pretty sure. If I get lost, I'll just have to turn around and come back to you."

He winked, but got little more than a scowl in response.

"You… you really won't tell anyone about us, will you?"

"I already said I wouldn't. What's the matter, don't you trust me?"

"No, not at all."

He placed his hand over his heart. "The lady wounds me so."

Eirwen flicked his shoulder, causing him to wince. "*Wren* wounded you. But I'm happy to add to your growing collection if you come back here."

He sighed deeply, sweeping into a bow and taking her hand. He'd barely realised before, when she was sewing him up, how rough and calloused her hands had become. Not the hands of a princess, not any more. He thought about telling her that a lady shouldn't have hands like hers, worn to bone by labour, but she'd probably snap at him and tell him no one should have hands like that.

And she'd be right, again, as always.

His sigh wasn't so put on, any more.

"Farewell, Eirwen," he said, desperately hoping it wasn't forever. "If…"

"Yes?"

"If ever there's a way I can return your kindness… let me know."

She blinked. Evidently, she had not been expecting this. "I… thank you. Goodbye, Cole."

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Eirwen watched until he'd faded from view.

Just to make sure he's really gone, she insisted.

Even Ivy got bored of watching, after a while, and Juniper was able to drag her away for a game of tag.

Garnet appeared at her elbow, her knowing smile screaming.

"What?" said Eirwen.

"So... who was that?"

"You know who that was! Prince Cole, son of my sworn enemy."

"And your former stepbrother."

Eirwen cringed.

"You know, I don't think I've ever heard you mention him before."

"He wasn't worth mentioning. And we weren't raised together. We lived under a very large roof for two years and spent only a couple of hours each day in each other's company, and even that was too much. He's an arrogant idiot who thinks he's charming."

"You mended his shirt."

"Nothing else would have fit him and he'd have made a tremendous fuss otherwise."

"If you say so."

Garnet was still smiling. Eirwen narrowed her eyes. "You still have a strange look about you."

"You stayed with him."

Eirwen looked down at the ground. “Regardless of my dislike for him, I wouldn’t want to wake up in a strange place by myself.”

“You’ve a kind soul, lass.”

“Thank you, Mama Gee,” said Eirwen, stooping to kiss her cheek, “I do.”

“Good, then you won’t mind helping me with the chores today. We’re expecting a guest later.”

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The guest turned out to be the Huntsman. A few months after Eirwen followed his advice and left the castle, he had found their homestead and wept with joy at seeing her alive and content. Ever since then, every few months, he stopped by, supposedly to see how she was getting on. For three years, Eirwen had believed this, but in the last two, she noticed that he always stayed after she went to bed, talking with the dwarves late into the night.

It was rude to listen in, but the curiosity expanded with every visit, festering at the back of her mind.

“You look well, Princess,” he said, giving her a clap on the back when she ran over the bridge to greet him. He was the only one who still used that title, all of the dwarves ignored it entirely, partly on Onyx’s orders, ‘there are no titles under this roof!’ he’d barked.

“Thank you,” she said. “How have you been?”

“Oh, you know, nothing much changes in Aberthor!”

Eirwen bit her lip. It was something he’d been saying for years, but something about her run-in with Cole unsettled her. For *him* to want to investigate his own mother, how bad had she become? If he felt the changes, what did the others under her control experience?

“Are you all right?”

“Um…”

She wondered if she should tell him about Cole. She’d kept the Huntsman out of the story she’d told the prince, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t worry. And in any case–

“You’re not our first guest of the day,” said Onyx gruffly. “Our peaceful home has been playing host to royalty, once again.”

The Huntsman frowned. “Royalty?”

“The girl ran into Prince Cole in Under the Mountain the other day, and last night he decided to return with a gift–”

“It wasn’t a gift!” Eirwen insisted. “And Wren did shoot him–”

“I’m sorry, what?” The Huntsman stared. “The Prince? Here? But–”

“It’s all right. He won’t tell his mother.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“I…”

Onyx snorted. “Fool of a girl trusts him, for some reason.”

“It’s not… it’s not that,” Eirwen said, glancing at the floor.

“Oh? Then what is it?”

She sighed. “Let me start at the beginning…”

She told the Huntsman everything as she guided him into the cottage, sitting him down beside the fire as she divulged all the details about Cole’s own doubts about his mother, and his belief that she must be under some kind of curse.

He must have been crushed to find out she wasn't, she kept to herself. She'd been saddened to discover her own father, kind though he was, had been regarded as a weak king. If she'd found out he was a murderer…

Although Cole still seemed unwilling to believe that part of the tale.

The Huntsman stroked his beard, ignoring the tankard Wren had offered him. "I never thought the prince would doubt his mother. He always seemed to adore her."

"I think he does," said Eirwen.

"Ah. And that's why you trust him."

She nodded. "If he was willing to go this far… I think that says *something* about his character."

Onyx scoffed. "You always believe the best in people. It'll get you into trouble one day."

"But until that day, I'll be happier than you, who always believes the worst."

In the kitchen, Garnet snorted into the spoonful of soup she was testing. Onyx growled. "Traitorous woman…"

"I'm sorry, dear, but she has you there. I hope Eira never stops believing the best in people. It's charming."

"It's asking for trouble."

The Huntsman sighed. "Thank you for not telling him about me. I'll keep an eye on him, just in case."

"Thank you."

The Huntsman took the twins out into the forest with Wren for a lesson in trapmaking. Eirwen helped Onyx with the animals and then spent some of the afternoon with Oakley in his hut, brewing potions. Dinner was ready by the time they were done. It was a pleasant affair. A cask of 'decent' ale was opened in the Huntsman's honour, and Wren got very rowdy after a few tankards. The twins retired early, but Eirwen stayed up a little longer, laughing and chatting with the others.

The conversations didn't last as long with her around, like there was something blocking them. She was at a difficult age for the adults, she knew. She looked like an adult. She mostly acted like one. She was approaching the age. But dwarven seventeen-year-olds were still children, and she knew they struggled with comprehending how fast she grew.

And there was something else, too. Something they weren't saying.

She retired not long after the twins, but she did not go to sleep. Not this time. Twenty minutes after she departed, she heard Garnet's footsteps on the stairs, felt her watchful gaze through the gossamer curtains.

"She's asleep," she heard her whisper.

The conversation grew quieter.

"Tell us, Huntsman," said Onyx darkly, "how bad is it in the capital?"

The Huntsman sighed. "The taxes–"

"We know about that. That affects *us*. But tell us *how bad* it is."

The sound shrivelled further away. The fire crackled in the grate.

"There are some households who will not survive the winter," said the Huntsman finally. "The poor will starve. There is nothing to be done, no charities to support them, no place for them to go. The queen cut funding long ago. Crime is up, obviously, but criminals are dealt with most severely. I am not sure what will remain of Aberthor if Queen Bianca reigns another year."

Eirwen shivered in her sheets.

"What… what would you suggest we do?" asked Wren after a pause.

"The Princess needs to return to Aberthor and challenge the Queen's right to the throne."

"No!" Garnet snapped. "No, no, I forbid it. She's too young. The Queen will cut her down in an instant–"

"Eirwen can handle herself," said Onyx. "She's tougher than you give her credit for, woman."

"She's tough," Garnet returned, "she's also *mine*. I don't want to see her hurt."

"Many others will be hurt if she does nothing," the Huntsman added. "The only difference is you won't see it. I know you think you're safe here in the woods, and perhaps you will remain mostly untouched by anything that transpires, but do you think the Princess will? Sooner or later, she may wish to return. She should have a say in her own fate."

Something shuffled below. Garnet must have stood up. "We… we'll speak to her in the morning," she said stiffly. "Let her have one more night of being a child."

Eirwen shuddered in her bed as the house grew cold and dark, wondering how long it had been since she had called herself that, and if she would ever sleep easily again.

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A pale, blue morning dawned, Eirwen snatching only a few hours of sleep. She woke long before the others. The Huntsman was stirring on his cot below, Wren snoring loudly in her chair beside the fire, empty tankards beside them. They were almost touching.

Eirwen crept to the Huntsman's side. "I heard your conversation last night," she said, careful not to disturb Wren.

The Huntsman stilled. "That is not how I would have chosen for you to find out."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It wasn't relevant–"

"My people–"

"Would still be suffering. There was a limit to what you could have done, whilst you were still so young. We would have to have found you a regent. But with your coming-of-age near at hand, and winter close by…"

"I want you to take me into the city."

"Your Highness–"

"Please," Eirwen begged. "I… I need to see it. If you don't escort me, I'll go myself, it'll just take me longer and be less safe."

He bowed his head. "As Her Highness commands."

"Thank you," she said. "I shall get dressed now. We will leave immediately."

She didn't want to face Garnet or any of the others, didn't want to lie to them about her intentions, to face their worry or concern. She would tell them later, when she returned.

Slipping out of the cottage, the feeling of leaving something behind shuddered inside her bones. For a while, she had been gnawed by the sensation that she did not quite belong inside those walls, but now all she wanted to do was crawl back inside them and stay there forever.

I am not ready, not ready for whatever I might see today.

She went anyway.

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It was a quiet journey through the woods. Most topics of conversation had been exhausted the night before, and any idle chat would have felt forced. They were journeying to face a monster.

Eirwen tried to focus on other things. She named the different trees, tried to describe the colours she saw. Burnt orange, deep purple, flame red. Mentally, she planned out some embroidery waiting for her back home. She summoned visions of the treasures waiting to be uncovered in her next excursion into Under the Mountain.

The journey still took forever, but eventually, the trees parted and the dark castle beamed down at her from the mountain ridges.

Home.

She had avoided coming this far out for years, had avoided the shadow of her city, its accusing glare across the fields that stretched out between the mountain and the woodland, but every so often, deep in the woods, she'd caught snatches of it through the trees. The glint of a tower. The wave of a banner.

Hello, Princess, I'm still here.

"Princess?" said the Huntsman, cutting through the silence.

"Yes?"

"Have you been… happy, these past five years?"

"Yes," she said, without a moment's pause.

He smiled weakly. "Good. I'm glad."

Eirwen hesitated. "If… if you ever felt guilty, about leaving me, about taking me away from this life, please don't. I'm very happy with the dwarves."

"It's not that." The Huntsman sighed. "It's more about what comes next."

Climbing to the top of the mountain did not take as long as she'd feared. In the five years since she'd been gone, great mechanical lifts had been installed at the base of the winding path leading up to the city. Eirwen had seen similar contraptions Under the Mountain, so they didn't surprise her as much as they might have, but she still let out a gasp when it thundered beneath her, climbing up the rocky ladder.

"These are incredible," she said.

The Huntsman shrugged. "I never said *all* her ideas were terrible," he said. "Although I suspect this one was more to make it easier for foreign dignitaries to attend her frequent parties."

The lift shuddered to a stop. Eirwen pulled up her hood. It would be almost impossible for her to be recognised –no one in the city would have known her well enough as a child to have even a whiff of remembrance as an adult– but she still felt exposed, walking under the iron gates, like a snowdrop rearing its head too early, before winter had even passed.

The Huntsman nudged her shoulder. "You'll be all right by yourself?"

Eirwen nodded. If she could handle the Underground, she could handle this. "Yes, thank you."

"Good. I have… business to attend to. Stay outside of the castle grounds today."

"But–"

"Don't stay too long. Don't see more than you have to."

"What do you–"

But the Huntsman had already disappeared.

Eirwen moved through the streets, through the throngs of people, towards places all at once familiar and utterly foreign. It was like a thin veneer of grey had washed over the city, an illustration left too long in the sun. The lustre of the place was gone. Ahead of her, a fountain she had played in as a child rose out of the crowd. The elaborate statue at the centre was polished and perfect, but there

were no playing children in it now. No one smiled around her, not one. Everyone looked too exhausted and too hungry to summon even a faint whisper of a smile.

She brushed her hands against the stone. Her father had held her hand as she'd skipped on it, long, long ago.

No skipping now. No games. No moments of delight.

She examined the faces of those passing her by, not one rising to make eye contact. Hundreds of empty, listless eyes, faces paled by more than the cold, pinched by hunger and slow, lingering illness.

I am not sure what will remain of Aberthor if the queen reigns another year.

Eirwen already thought she knew. How many of these faces would not survive the winter?

She moved silently through the streets, each one paved with memory, a dusting of some lighter, happier time. She stopped to eat, only briefly, barely hungry enough to swallow but knowing she needed something in her. She felt guilty for what she had, and handed her apple to a lone child without a word.

Whatever good a single apple would do.

A low drum beat through the gloom, emanating from the castle. Eirwen knew the sound. It was a rare but horrible occurrence, or it had been, in her time as princess. An execution.

She ignored the Huntsman's warning, and followed the crowd, making their way through the gates into the courtyard.

On a raised platform, a prisoner stood in chains before a wooden block. He was flanked by guards. Behind him stood a masked figure, tall and broad-shouldered. Eirwen could recognise him even at a distance. The Huntsman. In his grip, he brandished a giant axe.

Oh, oh no...

High above, on a balcony, stood two further figures and an entourage of guards. One was Cole, visible from a distance with his black hair and slim, dark form. There was a stiffness gripping every muscle, like a statue placed there by someone else.

The second figure was Queen Bianca.

She was wearing a dress the colour of crusted blood, and had swapped the usual crown –a woven band of silver– for a spiky, golden monstrosity. Her cold radiance flooded across the crowd as she raised the sceptre in her hand.

She was as ageless as the stars, as young as she had been the day she stepped out of the carriage, seven years ago. Eirwen had not thought it odd when they met, but she now looked barely any older than her son.

"Loyal subjects," she said, her voice like ice, "before you, we see a man condemned for trying to incite rebellion in our peaceful realm, a crime punishable by death. We shall not tolerate such treason. Justice must be swift and true. It is the only way to maintain order. I swear to you, I shall not rest until we have stamped out any flames of rebellion, lest it set fire to our beautiful capital. Prisoner, have you any last words?"

The man trembled, unable to speak. Eirwen looked around her, hoping that someone else would say something on his behalf. Her throat tightened. Her voice vanished. She could not cry out either.

No, no, someone stop this! Don't let her… please! Someone, anyone–

"Very well," said the Queen. "Peace be upon you, misguided soul."

She clicked her fingers. The axe swung with a dizzying thud. Eirwen could not look away even as the blood slithered onto the ground beneath the platform.

Her stomach swung into her ribcage.

She'd picnicked on that lawn.

A weak, half-hearted cheer lifted through the crowd. Eirwen sank to her knees. She looked up at the balcony, half in desperation, half in fury, but the Queen had already swirled away. This man meant nothing to her.

Cole was still standing there. For a moment, she thought he met her gaze.

The crowd started to move back through the gates. Eirwen stayed where she was until they dispersed, until the servants came to remove the body and scrub out the stains he'd left.

What else had he left behind? A life was more than a bloody mess beneath a chopping block. Who had he left behind? Who mourned him behind closed doors, too afraid to show their face today?

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

She didn't recognise any of the servants who came to clean up. All their faces were strangers to her. What had happened to the staff? Many of them had been serving her family their entire lives with generations of their families beforehand.

The Huntsman sat on the steps of the platform, cleaning his giant axe. His huge arms were stiff with far more than muscle, his face grave beneath the mask.

She crept towards him, but he did not meet her eyes.

He shook his head. "You should have stayed away."

"I needed to see what she was capable of."

"And now, you know," he said. "And you know what I'm capable of, too."

"I… I had no idea. What you did for her."

"I serve her loyally, so that one day I might serve you," he said. "It is for that reason alone I have been her servant, all these years."

What a faint, desperate hope to hold onto. Eirwen writhed guiltily in her muddy boots. She did not feel worthy of such loyalty. She feared she never would be.

A maid approached and stuffed the Huntsman's discarded rags into a basket with other blood-soaked sheets. There was a flash of light brown curls, the colour of sugar. Niamh.

The Huntsman glanced up, shaking his head, but Eirwen paid him no heed. She followed her to the laundry room. She couldn't let her vanish, couldn't let today be all awful.

She waited until they were alone.

"Niamhy," Eirwen whispered from the shadows.

Niamh stilled, the breathing inside her seizing. She shook her head, and tipped her basket into a massive bucket, plunging her arms into the hot, soapy water.

"It's me, Niamhy. Eirwen. Please turn around."

"No," said Niamh. "I'm imagining things."

"It's me," Eirwen continued. "I'm alive. I'm back. I'm safe."

Niamh turned, and lifted her gaze towards the voice. In a second, she clutched her hand to her mouth, tears splurging out of her. "I must have seen you a hundred times, heard you calling me every night… but I never imagined you grown." She swallowed. "Every time I saw you, you were just a child. I could never have imagined you like this, my sweet, darling girl…" She raced across the room, upsetting several piles of laundry, and pulled Eirwen into her arms. "You're here, you're here…"

All at once, Eirwen felt five years old again, wrapped up in Niamh's arms after a nightmare. It softened the memory of the chopping block, recent though it was. "I'm here."

"But… how? We were all sure your stepmother–"

"Tried to have me killed? Yes. Luckily her chosen assassin had a change of heart."

"The Huntsman?" Niamh guessed.

Eirwen nodded.

"I always wondered… he never seemed to have the heart for such a thing, but he's served her for years since–"

"He let me go. I was taken in by a family of dwarves and I've been living in the forests ever since, but when I heard that… that she…"

Niamh paled. "You saw."

"I saw."

Footsteps crunched across the path outside. "Niamh?" said a voice. Masculine, sharp. Cole. "Niamh, are you around? I need–"

"Hide!" hissed Niamh, gesturing to a nearby pile, "Quickly! If he sees you–"

"It's all right."

"What do you mean? If–"

Cole turned the corner into the room, stopping suddenly. "Snow," he said. "I didn't think you'd–"

Cold, white anger uncoiled inside her. "I had to see how bad things were for myself."

"And what's the verdict?"

"You stood there," Eirwen said. "You stood there by her side while she–"

"We *all* stood there. Including you."

"I couldn't do anything–"

"And neither can I!"

"You are her *son*. You think she would hurt you if you–"

"I really have no idea what my mother would do if I stood against her, and I don't particularly want to find out."

"You could just talk to her–"

"You think I haven't tried that? You think that isn't the first thing I tried, before resorting to magical jewellery? She won't listen. She's beyond listening."

"I… I can't let her do this anymore."

"Yes, I rather suspected that would be the case," said Cole, his face dark and pained. "So what are you going to do?"

Eirwen dropped her gaze. "I can't tell you."

"Of course you can't," he snapped, his eyes narrow.

"I'm sorry," Niamh interrupted, "but what's going on here? How does the prince know you're alive?"

"It's a long story," said Eirwen. "But it's a recent revelation."

Cole shook his head. "You should leave. If anyone but the two of us catches you here–"

"He's right," said Niamh shortly. "Come. I'll escort you to the gates, in case anyone gives you trouble." She bobbed her head. "Your Highness."

Cole did not meet Eirwen's gaze as she slipped past him. The rage stiffened to awkwardness, to a strange and unfamiliar kind of shame. She had been wrong to snap at him. He was far more powerless than she was.

But she wasn't going to apologise.

Niamh clutched onto Eirwen's arm as she steered her out of the grounds. "You have no idea how good it is to see you, my beautiful girl."

Eirwen squeezed her arm. "I'm sorry that I stayed away so long. That I didn't tell you I was alive. The dwarves said it was dangerous–"

“They’ve been good to you?”

“Like family.”

“Good, that’s wonderful, that’s so lovely to hear.” Niamh dabbed furiously at her eyes. “So what’s next?”

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It was almost dark by the time she made it back to the homestead, the light of the cottage swelling out into the dark like ripe pumpkins. Dinner was all laid out. Eirwen tumbled into the cottage, her body exhausted but her mind whirring.

“Heavens, child!” cried Garnet. “Where have you been? We’ve been worried–”

“I heard your conversation last night,” she said. “I went to see the city for myself.”

Onyx tapped his pipe against the table. “And?”

“And I think I’m going to need to take back my throne,” she said. “Can you help me?”

Onyx smiled, his black eyes glinting. “We thought you’d never ask.”

Part Two:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I;
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows and snows,
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

--Christina Rossetti--



Chapter Seven:

The Dance of Fire and Ice

Deciding she was going to challenge the queen was one thing. Actually doing it was another altogether. It would not be as simple as walking up to the castle, announcing her survival, and asking her stepmother to step down. Any plans to that effect were quickly shot down.

"If we do that, the Queen would cut her down in a moment, declare she was an imposter, and carry on as she has. It's too risky."

Eirwen smiled. "You sound like you know what you're talking about, Onyx. Ever taken back a kingdom before?"

"No, but I've spent a while imagining how I would do it."

"I didn't know you cared so much."

"Just looking for a way to be rid of you."

"So no public declarations just yet," said Merry, refiling his brother's tankard. "What does she need, then? Noble allies?"

Wren snorted. "The nobles grow fat off the people. As long as they behave, having *her* as queen suits them. They won't help."

"Not *all* nobles are evil, you know," said Eirwen indignantly. "Nobility doesn't make you black-hearted."

"No, but it helps corrupt a good one. Know any you can call on?"

Eirwen thought for a moment, wishing she'd been old enough before she left to know a little more about courtly politics. "My old friend Marie," she said eventually. "She's the only one I'd be willing to trust, at this point."

"Does she hold much power?"

Eirwen looked down. Marie detested courtly life and was only minor nobility. She'd hold little sway with anyone.

"That's a no, then," Onyx confirmed. He shook his head. "I think we're looking at a good, old-fashioned rebellion. Get the common folk on our side. Try a coup–"

"Possibly," said Eirwen. "But–"

"Why don't you try marrying Prince Cole and taking your throne back that way?" said a voice from the attic.

Eirwen burned. "I am *not* marrying that… *idiot*. He's vile and disgusting and *no*. I'd sooner die!"

Ivy giggled.

"Go back to sleep!" Garnet yelled up the stairs. "Or I'll send your father up."

"Ooh, scary," said Juniper.

"And then *I'll* come up after him."

The twins fell silent.

Eirwen sat fuming in her seat, stewing silently. Wren refilled her tankard. She necked the entire thing and slammed it back on the table.

"I think we need to know a little more first about our enemy," she announced.

"What are you proposing?"

"There's a ball in three weeks. The annual Fire and Ice Ball. Masquerade. I want to attend."

Five pairs of eyes looked at her like she was insane.

"To assassinate the Queen?" asked Wren. "Because that might work. It's been a while since I assassinated anyone, but I volunteer."

"We're not killing anyone."

"You can't expect to do this without bloodshed," said Onyx. "It's inevitable."

"Maybe. But I want to avoid it if I can. I don't want to start my reign with murder. It's… it's not me."

Onyx looked at her. "You need to steel yourself."

"I will," she said. "But… please. Just hear me out. I need to go back to court. I need to understand what it's like there… and I need to speak to Bianca myself."

"You think she'll talk to you, even in disguise?"

"I think," said Eirwen, looking at Oakley, "that we might make her."

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Eirwen began preparations the next day, gathering materials for her glamorous disguise. Oakley and Merry set to work on collecting the herbs for the potions they'd require. By far the most strenuous task would be creating a gown worthy to grace the halls of the palace. They were always a lavish affair. Anything less than exceptional would blow her cover in an instant.

The dwarves had limited funds available for the purchase of fabric, so Eirwen went back Under the Mountain to loot not just for coin, but for crystals too, stitching them onto the skeleton of a gown painstakingly every night, sometimes with the help of Garnet, Ivy and Oakley, who were all deft hands. An old mask was recovered and repurposed. In the end, the only thing they bought was an old gown and frame, and a handful of new ribbons.

The creation at the end of the process was anything but worn and frayed. It was glittering, shimmering delight, a carpet of frost and starlight.

When Eirwen climbed into it, she barely recognised the woman in the reflection. At the same time, she was more herself than she'd been in five years. A princess once more.

A queen.

"Do you think we overdid it?" she asked Garnet as she laced her in.

Garnet grinned. "Not at all, love. You look splendid."

They curled her hair, braiding it with silver thread and studding it with painted leaves. They lined her eyes with black, pulled on the mask, and rouged her cheeks and lips.

She descended into the main room. Wren and Merry whistled. Ivy and Juniper gasped. Onyx and Oakley nodded approvingly, the former still puffing on his pipe.

"Onyx! Tell your daughter how beautiful she is!"

Onyx turned to Ivy. "You look beautiful, love."

"Onyx!"

"Oh, you meant the human one. I suppose she scrubs up well."

Garnet sighed.

"I'll ready the cart," said Wren, standing up. "You sure about this next step?"

"I don't think we have another choice."

The ‘next step’ involved waiting by the roadside, covered and concealed, for the Von Transinberg carriage to go by. Eirwen had agonised over sending word ahead to Marie but had eventually decided against it, just in case the letter fell into the wrong hands, or Marie didn’t believe her. They weren’t so close that she could rely on Marie to recognise her handwriting, which had become somewhat scrawled and neglected in the past five years. In the end, the only thing they’d done was ask Niamh to double-check that Marie absolutely would be attending.

This was the safest way, although still risky if Marie travelled with a large, or heavily armed party. Knowing her friend’s dislike for people, and that her father never attended functions he could send his daughter to instead, Eirwen was hopeful that they wouldn’t be shot at.

The only challenge would be convincing Marie to let her use her invitation.

A whistle through the trees. A signal from Merry. The carriage had been spotted.

Eirwen inhaled deeply. No time to be timid. She stepped out into the road, holding up her hands.

“Halt!” she said. “I must speak with your mistress.”

The driver pulled on the reins. Four black horses ground to a halt, adorned with jewelled harness and blue feathers. “Who goes there?” he called.

“I cannot give you my name, but your mistress knows me. Please allow me to speak with her.”

“I cannot,” said the driver, drawing a pistol, “I must ask you to move.”

The clicking of three other pistols sounded in the undergrowth, and Merry, Wren and Onyx stepped out of the shadows.

“This isn’t a hold-up, man,” said Onyx, grinning, “but it also isn’t a request.”

The driver put down his weapon. The footman held up his hands.

Eirwen raced towards the carriage, clambering in as quickly as her dress would allow.

The occupant let out a sharp gasp, clutching and the mounds of frosted, ice-blue fabric she was stitched into. She was a pretty, plump girl, with grey eyes and brown tresses curled in perfect ringlets. Eirwen recognised her in an instant.

“Saints and stars!” screeched Marie. “Who are you?”

Eirwen undid her mask. Marie paled, the breath falling out of her.

“No, surely… it… it can’t be.”

Eirwen smiled. “You recognise me, then? I wasn’t sure you would. I know it’s been a long time–”

“A *long time?*” Marie hissed. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

“The rumours of my death were greatly exaggerated…”

“The funeral–”

“Was spectacular, or so I hear. I wasn’t there for it.”

Marie’s eyes rolled slightly back in her sockets. She clutched her chest. “Sorry, this is… rather a lot.”

“Yes, sorry, I did think about writing to you, only I wasn’t sure you’d believe me if you couldn’t see me.”

“I… I don’t… Where have you *been* all this time?”

“Here, in the forests. I was taken in by a family of dwarves.”

“But… why? Why not go back to the castle, to your–” She stopped, reading the look in Eirwen’s face. “Oh, I see. So, now what? You’re going to take back the throne?”

“Yes. At some point. Tonight is more of a… reconnaissance mission. I’m gathering intel.”

“And you need my help getting in?”

Eirwen nodded.

"Oh, how thrilling!" Marie banged the roof of the carriage. "Albert! Please resume the journey. We have an extra guest tonight."

Albert did not reply, but the carriage began plodding along again. Eirwen glanced out of the carriage and saw the dwarves slinking off into the night. Wren saluted as she disappeared, and Eirwen tried to swallow the bout of fear that was bubbling inside her. There was no thrill here, like when she journeyed into the mountains, only quiet dread. She knew what she was doing in the Underground. The palace, however familiar to her, was a new beast entirely.

Marie stared at Eirwen as they slid through the forest. "You look good," she said.

"For a corpse?"

"In general. Fabulous dress."

"Thanks, I made it."

"You always were excellent with the embroidery…" A few more moments ticked by. Marie snapped her fan shut. "I'm sorry, is that it?"

"What?"

"You've been gone for *five years* and you show up, completely out of the blue, asking for my help to take down your evil stepmother, and *that's it?*"

Eirwen blinked. "What… what else did you want me to say?"

"Hmm, a simple, 'how have you been, Marie?' would be a start!"

Eirwen put her head in her hands. "Oh, you're right. Marie, I'm so sorry. I don't always know what I'm supposed to say. How have you been?"

"I've been… fine, I suppose. A shocking lack of things have happened, if I'm honest. I've read some excellent books lately, though. I imagine you could tell a more interesting tale?"

Eirwen shrugged. Marie groaned, loud enough to shake the carriage.

"Eirwen! Tell me what you've been doing!"

"Oh, right!"

For the remainder of the journey, Eirwen filled in Marie on what had happened in her absence, from fleeing the castle and finding the dwarves, to exploring Under the Mountain and the treasures she'd encountered, to bumping into Cole and what had transpired after.

"Wait, *Cole* knows you're alive?"

"Yes."

"And he hasn't told his mother, who wants you dead?"

"Yes."

"Well, colour me surprised. I always thought he was wrapped around her little finger."

"Me too."

"I… I can't believe you've been alive all this time, and never told me."

"I thought about it. Dozens of times. Particularly at the start when living like I was was a little… tough, to say the least."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was scared. Scared of Bianca finding out. What that would mean for you."

"I would have kept you safe."

Eirwen shook her head. "You have an estate, dozens of servants. Too many people who might have sold me out. I feared her wrath far too much."

"And now?"

"I still fear it," she admitted. "But… I have to face it. Before things get worse."

Marie sighed. “Ah, what an excellent story… Our brave heroine rises from tragedy to face a fearful villain for the sake of her people…” She leant back into her seat, fanning herself. “You don’t have a love interest, do you?”

“Why would that matter?”

“Stories like this always have a love interest.”

“I have not the time or inclination for romance, Marie.”

“A pity. For the story’s sake, at least. It’s not really my preference at all.”

“But you *love* romances.”

“In books, sure. In real life? I’d rather not. Complicated, messy affairs. Everything makes more sense when it’s written down.” She leaned towards the window. “We’re nearly there.”

They passed through the city gates shortly after, continuing the winding route towards the castle, lit up like a firecracker against the swirling ink-black sky. Music emanated from the gardens, crawling through the chill evening air.

The carriage drew to a close. The footman hurried to help them down, his wary eyes on Eirwen.

“Don’t stare, Liefried, it’s rude,” Marie snapped at him.

“Ah, yes, My Lady.”

Eirwen stood in front of the main staircase, the grand doors thrown wide before her. The castle was open and alive, and she did not know what it thought of her, or what she should feel.

Home, home. The lair of her enemy.

Marie linked her arm into hers. “Take it slow, if you need to.”

“I am not afraid,” she said. “Not of this.”

A lie, perhaps, but one that made her feel better as they ascended the steps together. Their gowns trailed behind them, glittering ice and starlight. Marie handed her invitation to the guard, who checked it carefully, announcing her presence to the hall awash with beautiful people.

The ballroom was strung with banners and light, towering ice sculptures, mesmerising displays of blue roses and fire lilies. Entertainers were scattered around the room, jugglers and magicians, musicians and jesters. Not a corner was unoccupied. Tables were laden with food; roast venison, stuffed pheasants, mounds of buttery vegetables and delicate pastries. Eirwen’s traitorous mouth began to water. It had been a long time, too long, since she had sampled anything like the feast before her.

“Say what you like about your evil stepmother,” whispered Marie in her ear, “she throws a fabulous party.”

They walked down the centre to the dais at the far end of the room. Seated on the singular throne sat Queen Bianca, draped in a dress of many colours; panels of blue, red, purple and orange, embellished with gold. The sharp cut of the gown cast the effect of a stained glass window.

Marie was announced again, dropping into a low curtsey. Eirwen followed suit, not daring to look up at the Queen’s eyes for fear of recognition. Her knees trembled inside the dome of her skirt.

“Welcome, Marie Von Transinberg,” said the Queen. “It has been a while since your last visit to court. I hope you are well.”

“Plenty well, Your Majesty. You are as radiant as I remember you.”

The Queen smiled. “And who is your splendid companion?”

Eirwen stilled.

“My cousin, Alia Von Eisenever. It is her first visit to your palace.”

The Queen rose from her seat, and crossed the floor between them. Eirwen kept still, rooted to

the spot, staring at the pointed ends of the Queen's golden shoes.

"Rise, dear child."

Eirwen rose, and looked into the eyes of the person who wanted her dead. There was nothing in them. No flicker of recognition, only the vacant glance of stony indifference.

"You have beautiful eyes, child."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." She added no compliment afterwards, no hint of plastered flattery. She knew she was expected too. She hoped she came off as too nervous to remember the protocol.

"Hmm. Enjoy the party, my dear."

She swept back to the throne.

For the first time since she entered the room, Eirwen's nerves vanished. She was no longer afraid. She was angry.

That was my father's seat. Now it is mine. Mine, and I will take it from you. Just give me time.

There was a light pressure on her arm.

"Come, Alia, let us away." Marie tugged her to the side of the room. "Well, that was equal parts thrilling and terrifying. I hope you don't mind that I gave you a name. Are you all right?"

"I think so."

"Do you need me to help you with anything?"

Eirwen shook her head. "I think I'll be fine. I need to find Cole."

"Cole?"

"I'm calling in a favour."

Marie shrugged. "Well, I'll be in the library, most likely, if you need me. Don't run away without saying goodbye this time."

Eirwen nodded, and watched as her friend vanished back into the crowd. She was all alone now.

Chapter Eight:

Revelations After Dark

Eirwen swam through the dancers, trying not to get distracted by the beautiful blue-gold haze of the room, and hunted for Cole. Technically, she supposed, she could do this without him, but it would be much easier and much less terrifying with his assistance.

Don't say no, she prayed silently. *Please, don't say no…*

She drifted down into the throngs of people, sweeping up a goblet of wine and only remembering the proper way to drink it at the last minute. It was deliciously sweet; meant to be savoured, not knocked back like the dwarven ale she'd grown accustomed to. She was all at once overwhelmed with familiarity and completely out of her depth. This was her world, once. She had adored these affairs, the glamorous people, the fine food, the dancing with her Papa.

Her Papa. This was the first time she had been to a ball without him.

Don't lose focus. Find Cole.

It was difficult to find anyone amidst so much colour and sound, and there were many dark-haired men on the dancefloor. Few matched his height, but it still wasn't much to go on. She moved around the tables carefully, appraising every man who matched his form, drifting onto the balconies and into the gardens. She couldn't believe so much nobility existed in the world, how opulent everything was. A single ring on most of their fingers could have fed a family for a year. Ridiculous, extravagant.

I would not have cared, if I had never left. I would never know the true value of wealth.

Finally, she found herself in a small corridor away from the main hall. A dozen portraits stared down at her. She knew them all. King Aldred 3rd, a jolly, benevolent man. King Toryn 1st, his warmongering son. Her great-grandmother, Richildis 2nd, a fair ruler with a love of horses, great aunt Marigold, who ran off with a scullery maid, and–

Mother.

It had been so long since Eirwen had seen her likeness, she had almost forgotten her face entirely. It was now more a mirror than a painting. Eirwen saw a face almost exactly like it every morning. It could only have been painted a few years before she died. They were almost the same age.

It was hard to miss something you never had, especially when Eirwen had Niamh to cling to, but just for a moment, she thought about how different life would have been if she'd lived. How much easier. How much less painful.

But there would be no cottage in the woods. No Ivy and Juniper, no Garnet and Onyx, no Merry and Oakley and Wren.

No choice. No trade. It did not bear thinking about.

Eirwen felt someone stop behind her. "If you stand there any longer, people are going to notice the similarities."

She spun round. A tall, slim figure in midnight blue stood behind her in the shadows, his body almost part of them. An elaborate silver mask shone out of the darkness, high cheekbones dusted with shimmering paint. Cole.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Lady, I would recognise your illustrious beauty under any guise–"

"Cole."

"You're standing next to a portrait of your mother. I put the two together. Now, mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"I have a request."

"Is it a dance?" he said, stepping out of the shadows. "A single night of passion? I shall, of course, oblige–"

"Could you please stop flirting with me?"

"Why? Are you finding me too irresistible?"

"No, too irritating. We have a job to do."

"I must say, I like the sound of 'we'. Am I allowed to flirt with you when we *don't* have a job to do?"

Eirwen ignored him, retrieving a tiny vial and a ring from the pocket she'd sewn into her dress.

"That wasn't a no…"

"This ring compels the wearer to tell the truth. I was hoping you would be willing to convince your mother to wear it, to get to the bottom of this matter."

Cole seized the piece from her, holding it up to the light. "A decent proposal. What's the vial for?"

"The ring compels the truth from you, but you remember speaking it. If I ask your mother straight up if she ordered my death, she's going to have questions in the morning. If you add the contents of this vial to her drink… she won't remember anything afterwards."

Cole glanced from the vial to Eirwen's pleading face.

"So, let me get this straight… you've come here tonight to convince me to drug and interrogate my mother?"

"That is correct, yes."

"That's… fair," he said, deflating. "But I have a condition."

"All… all right."

"I do the questioning."

"What?"

"I don't want you going against her. You probably don't either, right? And I have questions of my own."

"I can't have you interrogate her without me–"

He shook his head. "We'll take her to the chamber behind the throne. All the tribute is taken there. I'll convince her that the ring is a gift."

"There's a servant's passage there," Eirwen remembered.

"Precisely. Perfect for you to eavesdrop. Do you remember where the entrance is?"

"Of course." Eirwen turned to head for it.

"Not yet," Cole said. "It's too early. We need to wait a while."

"Well, what do you propose we do in the meantime?"

Cole grinned, slipping the ring and the vial into his pocket. He turned back to the music. "A dance."

"What?"

"For reasons, we must dance. Come on. Haven't you missed this?"

Eirwen did not want to admit it, but she had. As much peace as she found in the cottage, as

much joy, she missed the finery, the feasts, the dancing.

"Fine," she said, "but only one."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not forcing you. I only want a dance if *you* want a dance."

"I do," she said. "Stop… whatever it is you're doing."

He held out his hand, grinning wickedly. There was a sinful quality to the pull of his lips that had escaped her as a girl, but rippled into her now. "As my lady commands."

"Technically, it's Your Highness. And I think I may outrank you as this is *my castle*."

"Ssh," he said, pulling her towards the dance floor. "Your crown is yours whenever you wish to take it, but maybe don't shout it too loudly, given the present company?"

Eirwen bit her lip as Cole's hand slid around her waist, her chest tightening. "You mean that?" she said, lowering her voice. "You'd give up the crown to me?"

"It's yours by right. I have no need or want for it. Mother might take a *little* persuading though…"

He swung her out of his arms and back into them in a swift second. Eirwen half tripped, grabbing onto him to stabilise herself.

Cole chuckled in her ear. "You have… not improved, over the years."

"I am out of practise. This is not how dwarves dance."

"What? Elegantly?"

"Don't be rude."

"I apologise." He spun her round and back into the fold of his arms. "You're too stiff," he said. "Lighten up."

"Your proximity makes me tense."

He snorted. "I don't remember your tongue being so sharp."

"I don't remember you being this irritating."

He dipped her. "By 'irritating' do you mean flirtatious?"

"Could you *be* any more infuriating?"

He squared up to her, his smile sinful. "Is that a request, or a dare?"

"Stop doing that!"

"Why?"

Eirwen's thoughts stuttered. *Because you never mean anything when you flirt. Because I'm not used to it. Because I don't know how to react. Because it catches me off guard. Because I don't understand romance.*

Because you make me feel powerless.

"Perhaps you're not as charming as you think you are."

"Oh no, that can't be it," he said. "But no matter. I shall keep my flirting to a minimum in future."

"I don't believe you."

"I mean, I'll *try*."

"In the same way that I am trying to dance?"

Cole laughed. A real, genuine, warm laugh, like a crackle of sunlight along a dark horizon. When he brought her close for another movement, he held her against him for a fraction of extra time. A moment longer than he needed to. "I really have missed you, Snow."

The dance slid to a close. Cole was still smiling at her.

"I'd keep dancing with you, but if my mother sees any more of your clumsy moves, she's going to recognise you for sure."

"I see. Shall we agree to meet again in an hour?"

"Are you alone here?"

"More or less," she said, unwilling to throw Marie's name into the mix.

Cole shook his head. "Come with me," he said.

He took her to the music room, a round gilded chamber housing every instrument imaginable. Nothing about this room had changed in five years. She'd stood on Cole's feet a lot on these floors, spent hours learning the harp. The same one still sat in the corner of the room. Her fingers itched for it, reaching out to pluck the strings. The chords struck something deep inside her. *Hello, old friend.*

Cole went over to the piano and lifted the lid, sliding onto the stool and pressing his fingers against the keys. A sweet, lilting tune stung the air, beating back the orchestra in the ballroom.

"I am surprised your mother kept the portrait of mine," she said.

Cole made a noncommittal gesture, swaying in time to his own music. "I don't think she often goes into that corridor."

"Do you?"

Cole bit his lip, still smiling. She tried not to pay too much attention to the pull of his lips, refocusing her gaze on the keys of the piano, but that was almost worse. There was something in the way that Cole's deft hands moved that held her gaze, something attractive about his careful, tapered fingers.

"Do you still sing?" he asked.

"Whenever I can," she said, thinking more of the dwarven ditties she'd half-hum as she hung the laundry out to dry, mucked out the stables, washed the dishes. She had sung nothing refined and courtly in a long time. She wondered if she even remembered any.

Cole switched keys. She knew this tune, the words falling out of her before she found the strength to resist. Cole glanced at her for a second, and then closed his eyes, holding on to every note she uttered. The air crackled with fine, sharp music, bursting with a song of lonely winters and lost loves.

"Perfection," said Cole, as the song drew to a close. "Another?"

"We cannot stay here for an entire hour, surely? What would we talk about?"

"You have almost five years of adventures to fill me in on. Why not start there?"

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What have you been doing in five years?"

"Growing ever more handsome and steadily more skilled on the piano," he said, tapping out another tune, "can't you tell?"

"You're different."

"Different how?"

"Well, you're still just as annoying, but… I don't know."

Another grin, a sliver of mischief. "Do you like me more, now?"

"Well, it would have been hard to like you less."

Cole choked on his laughter, breaking his tune.

Eirwen slid in beside him and tapped out a few notes. The keys felt alien beneath her fingertips, it had been so long. She could barely remember how to play at all, and was conscious of how Cole's skill far outstripped her own.

"Something wrong?"

"I'm worried you'll tease me."

"Would you like a lesson?"

Eirwen scowled, and slammed down her fingers, banging out a short sequence before her nerves could seize her. It was clunky, but not awful. She slowed down, taking her time, trying to remember an old song from childhood.

It did not come. Instead, she improvised, adapting a simple dwarven tune and singing over the parts she couldn't quite manage.

"Pretty," said Cole, his dark eyes fixed on her.

"It needs practise."

"So does everything in this world." He opened the book of sheet music and thumbed through the pages. "Remember this one?"

"I do."

"I'll be primo, you be secondo."

They played together as the evening wore on, stopping every so often to divulge a tale of the lost years. They sang together. Eirwen taught him an old dwarven ballad. She tried to adapt it on the harp, but it lapsed into an old melody, one she'd almost forgotten, a story from childhood folded away. It was like sliding into an old pair of slippers. The brightness of the ballroom had overwhelmed her senses, but this, this was familiar. She belonged in this room amidst the music and the dimmed, starry light.

"Beautiful," Cole breathed.

"I sincerely hope you are talking about the music."

He smirked. "If that is what you wish."

"Do you think enough time has passed, now? Can we go and ambush your mother?"

"Sick of me already, Snow?"

"It's been an hour."

"Actually, it's been closer to two. I guess my company was charming after all."

Eirwen stood up sharply, whipping out her fan and snapping his nose inside it. "Now, Cole."

"All right…" He rubbed his nose and slid off the stool, offering his hand to help her up. "No need to get so snappy."

He opened the door, and they slipped back into the corridor.

"You sure you can do this?" Eirwen asked.

"Are you?"

Eirwen paused. She couldn't deny that Cole taking on this role was much, much easier. The potion might wipe Bianca's memory, but she still had no way of hiding who she was once she began her questioning, no way of stopping her from calling for the guards. If Cole hadn't offered, she'd been planning on tying her up, but getting her away from the crowds would have been a mission in itself.

She ought to be thanking him.

"A few sips of wine should be enough, it's very potent," she said instead. "It should take effect within a matter of minutes."

He tapped his breast pocket, where the vial lay. "Understood. Take care." He walked away from her, back towards the party. Eirwen, meanwhile, turned down another corridor, feeling along the walls for the concealed panel she remembered from her youth. One of them felt hollow beneath her palm. A quick inspection revealed a hidden latch.

She squeezed into the narrow passageway. It was dark and damp, filled with cobwebs that clung to her skin as she pushed by. The gems on her dress scraped against the stone. She had not thought about how tight the space would be.

She took a chip of sunstone out of her pocket. Faint light rayed from her fingers, illuminating just enough to help her press towards the antichamber. It was a long, slow crawl in the dark, but finally laughter drifted into the passage.

The Queen. She was already there.

Her laughter crawled against Eirwen's heart, like grains of ice and sand.

She stuffed her sunstone back into her pocket. Faint dappled light dribbled into the passage ahead. The panel into the chamber was a cut-out screen. She could see Bianca stretched out on a chaise, goblet in hand, with Cole beside her sorting through a mound of gifts.

"Another set of crystal glasses from the Marquis De Villenueve," Cole proclaimed, holding up one for her inspection. "Just as tasteless as the last half-dozen."

Bianca snorted. "I never know what to do with that odious man. Did the Duchess of Pigna send anything? She always sends beautiful gifts."

"I'm not sure," said Cole, pretending to sort through them. He slipped the ring out of his pocket. "Hello! This is a pretty thing. Try it on, Mother." He sat down beside her and slid it onto her finger. "A perfect fit."

The Queen gazed at it. "I've seen nicer rings," she said.

Eirwen flattened herself against the panel, taking care not to move it, but desperate to see more, to check for some imperceptible change in Bianca's countenance, a clue to whether or not it was working.

Cole paused for a moment. "Mother," he said carefully, "what's your favourite colour?"

"Red, dearest."

"Your favorite food?"

"Pheasant with blackberry sauce."

"And where were you born?"

"The capital city of Florin, Adris."

At this, Cole frowned. Queen Bianca had been born in Venetiza, a country across the sea from Florin. It was a matter of fact and public record. But Cole didn't push this. Evidently, something about her demeanour convinced him she was telling the truth. He exhaled, his sigh bone-deep.

"Mother… did you kill Eirwen?"

The Queen stared at him solidly for a moment. Eirwen stilled, afraid the spell had shattered, that the ring couldn't compel such a huge truth from someone.

"No," she said eventually, "but I did order her death. My loyal Huntsman brought me back her heart as proof."

The colour drained from Cole's face. "What… *what*?"

"He told me that there was so little left of her body after he finished the deed it would have been too unsightly to bring her back to the castle." Bianca giggled, sipping more of her wine. "I think I might like to have seen that. But her heart was delicious."

"You… you *ate* her heart?"

Eirwen suppressed a shiver, a coldness creeping under her skin. It was like being plunged under the ice.

"I was told it would make me more powerful."

"But… why?" Cole continued, his body rigid.

The Queen frowned. "For you, my son. For us. So that you can be king of two kingdoms. So we could start an empire together."

"I… what if I don't want that?"

"It is your right."

"Why? Why is it mine?"

"Because I had nothing, and you deserve everything!"

"Mother… what are you talking about?"

She sighed. "I am not Queen Bianca," she said. "I never was. I was just a maid in the castle of your father, but I was given a gift, an opportunity…" She twisted a golden ring on her finger, one Eirwen knew well. A favourite of hers, set with a great white gem. "This is an ancient fairy ring. It gives me the ability to look however I want. So the night Princess Bianca came to the castle to marry your father, I killed her and took her place. He never knew the difference, the fool. Never once caught on, in eight years…"

Cole looked like he wanted to vomit. "Did… did you kill him?"

"I… I had to, my darling boy. He was starting to doubt your parentage, with that beautiful black hair of yours…"

She raised a hand to touch it, but Cole jerked away, rising from the seat and crossing the room, his back to his mother as if he couldn't bear to look at her. His eyes drifted towards the panel where Eirwen was, and she wondered if he was searching for her.

"Was… was he really my father?"

"Of course." The queen rose from the chaise, stepping towards him. "But you… you take after me. My real face, not this borrowed one. I could hardly explain that to him, could I?"

Cole swallowed. "And… and Olwen? Did you kill him too?"

"I… I didn't mean to. He was the only man I ever… he was kind to me. Good to me. I thought, in time, he might… But then he was injured, and as I nursed him through the night, he called for *her,* his first wife. He wanted a corpse over me. I… I snapped. I picked up the pillow and smothered him with it."

Eirwen sank backwards into the tunnel. She had suspected something like this for years, had sleep torn up with visions of his passing, but hearing it confirmed–

Oh, oh Papa...

Cole's face was a stark mask of unbridled horror. "How… how could you do that?"

"Because he didn't love me! Because no one has ever loved me…" She seized his arms and turned him round to face her, pressing her hands to his cheeks. "Apart from you."

"So… so you killed him?"

"Like I said, I didn't mean to. I just snapped. And then after he died, I realised Eirwen would be next in line to the throne, that we had only a few more years…"

"We could have just gone back to Florin! You didn't have to kill her–"

"The people of Florin hated us!"

"They hate us here too, mother."

"No. Here, they fear us. As they should. Fear, my son, is far more reliable than love and hate."

"But why? Why do any of this?"

"I told you; it is our right!"

"You just told me you aren't even royalty!"

"Exactly. For years I served that ungracious family, cleaning their filth, taking care of their every need. Not a word of thanks, of acknowledgement, not even when my fingers bled from the work, when my back felt close to breaking…"

"You've become what you hated."

A sharp slap cracked through the air. "Hold your tongue, boy! You don't know how hard I've

fought for you!"

I really have no idea what my mother would do if I stood against her, Cole had said. Eirwen wasn't sure she wanted to know now, either.

Cole put a hand against his cheek. "Forgive me, Mother. I don't know what came over me."

He took her hand, pressing his lips to her long, white fingers. He slid the truth ring off, an action that went unnoticed by his mother.

"Please, allow me to return to the festivities. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

He slipped out of the room. Eirwen pressed her hand against the panel and felt its give. How easy it would be, to slip in now, to confront her, to take the dagger hidden in her skirts and plunge it into her heart. She deserved death. Eirwen deserved vengeance.

She did not know what stopped her. Fear of repercussions? Fear for her soul, of becoming as bad as her enemy?

In that moment, she would have borne the stain willingly. She did not care.

But the Queen swept out before she could move, and the moment was lost.

Chapter Nine:

The Resistance

Cole stumbled down the steps, through the crowds, away from the music and the dancing and the people. Away from her.

She'd done it. She'd really done it. She tried to kill Snow. She *had* killed Olwen. And his own father.

You don't know how hard I've fought for you.

No. Not for him. For herself.

That wasn't even her real face. All his life, he'd wondered why he didn't resemble either of his parents, why his father seemed to resent him so. Now he knew. Because he looked like some other, unknown face, the face of a woman he'd never seen.

A killer's face. A killer, all along.

And it looked like his.

A dozen courtiers rose to greet him, eager for his favour, a smile, a dance, but he brushed through them all, fighting his way towards his chambers.

"Your Highness, are you quite all right?"

A servant, stepping into his path. What did he look like?

"A headache," he said, "too much wine, perhaps. I'll be retiring early."

"Shall I send–"

"No, thank you."

He reached his quarters not long after, shutting the door tightly behind him. He felt numb, like his body didn't belong to him, numb and cold and sick.

"Cole."

He looked up. Eirwen was standing in his room, her face whiter than snow.

"Eirwen." He had not thought about her, not spared a second for what she must have been going through, listening to his mother spout that poisonous confession. "Did you… did you hear everything–?"

"I heard."

"She… she killed him. She killed your father. She killed *mine*. All this time, I... she…"

His legs sunk underneath him, but before he could fall, Eirwen bolted across the room and swept under his arms. She guided him towards the bed, pulling a blanket around his shoulders.

"What… what are you doing?"

"You're cold," she said, placing a hand against his cheek. "You might be going into a kind of shock."

A hard breath shuddered out of him. He crashed his head down on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he wept, "I'm so sorry…"

"Please don't be sorry," she whispered, sliding her arms around his back. "Be frustrated, be angry, be sad… but don't be sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"It's all right. I wouldn't have wanted to believe me either."

"You must think me a fool."

"No, I think you're a boy who loves his mother and wanted to believe the best of her."

At this, a little more breath slipped out of him and the sobs grew tighter in his chest.

"She wasn't always like this," he choked. "She used to sing me to sleep every night. She never left my side if I was sick. She taught me how to dance. She'd chase me through the rose gardens of Florin and laugh when she caught me…" He paused. "But even then, she was a killer. She killed the real Bianca. I don't… I don't know who or what she is..."

Or even what she looks like.

If possible, Eirwen's arms grew even tighter around him. "Tell me what to do," she said. "What do you need?"

"I don't… I don't know."

"Then I will stay with you until you do."

A fool's promise. It could take him days, weeks to unravel what he'd just heard. She couldn't afford to stay once the masquerade was over.

But just for a little while, he held onto her, and tried to believe he wasn't completely alone in the world.

∞∞∞

There was a strange kind of fogginess to the night before, which Bianca put largely down to the wine. She couldn't remember a great deal after she and Cole slipped away to admire their gifts. Such wonderful presents. Such a sweet boy.

Much of before then was a beautiful haze of masks and shimmering fabric, a surreal, glittering dream. How much she adored parties, even if they were so fleeting.

She remembered that girl's eyes, though, blue, unflinching, haunting. Eyes that had burned across her dreams and twisted nightmares for years after she received her bloody heart in a box.

Not her. Couldn't be her. Just some silly, twisted remnant of flimsy guilt. There had been a few times where she'd wondered if the girl had to die. Not many. She'd been sure it was the right thing to do, at the time, the only thing to do, to secure their position.

Then she'd watched Cole's blank face through the funeral procession, watched him slip away during the wake. She'd followed him as he ran up to his room, slammed the door behind him, and dissolved into noisy sobs so loud it shook the very stone. She'd stood on the steps, struck dumb by the sound. He had never said a nice thing about her before. Had he cared after all? He had barely shed a tear when his father died.

She wondered if she should go to him, especially when she was the source of all this grief, but before she could make up her mind, a servant slipped into the room instead. The girl's former nursemaid. Bianca heard them cry together.

She had been planning on dismissing the maid. She didn't want any remnant of that girl left in this place. No reminder that the palace hadn't always been theirs. She half wanted to dismiss the woman *more* now, now that she dared occupy the space where she, as his mother, should be.

But how could she do that to him, when he could not go to her, not for this?

She sighed. She supposed the maid could stay for now.

She pressed her fingers against the door and listened to him sob. The sound struck something into her chest, a twisted knife of guilt.

A child, a child, she was only a child.

She shook it away. Not only a child. A princess. A threat. No, no, it had to be done. He'd see that eventually.

The memory rattled her, gnawing at her sense of righteousness, her confidence. That would not do.

She crossed to the room and drew back the black curtain that concealed the greatest of her treasures. Her most powerful servant, her valuable benefactor. The source of every joy.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

The Mirror shimmered. A face of pure white rose from the depths of the dark reflection, a pale mask. Cool, calming words, like liquid made vocal, echoed around her chamber. "You are, My Queen."

Bianca sighed.

"You look troubled, My Queen."

"I am uneasy. I feel… like I'm being watched."

"Ask any question of me, and I will answer."

"Are my people happy?"

A pause. "No, My Queen."

"Do they fear me?"

"Yes, My Queen."

"Do they still plot against me?"

Another pause. "Yes, My Queen."

"Where?"

The Mirror's reflection grew dark and murky.

"It has not yet been decided," he announced. "Ask again tomorrow."

Bianca balled her fingers into fists. "I will find them," she hissed. "I will stamp them all out. This kingdom will be the richest, the greatest, the most beautiful. It will be a shining gem."

"Of course, My Queen. You will make it so."

"Can you see it? Can you show it to me?"

"I cannot see ahead," the Mirror replied. "Only what is. But I believe in you, My Queen. I always have."

She believed it too. Once she'd removed the flicker of rebellion, the kingdom would be at peace. No one would wreak havoc in their perfect city again. She would have justice. She would have order. She would have perfection.

Nothing to fear, my people, if you play by the rules. Let it never be said that I was not fair.

The fairest of them all.

∞∞∞∞

Eirwen was gone when Cole woke in the morning. There was a strange coldness to his bed, like she'd sucked away a warmth that hadn't existed before. He did not remember her leaving, but there was no way she could have stayed all night, not in that dress. Whatever fugue state he'd entered after last night's revelations, he was certain her stepping out of that dress would have snapped him out of it.

Niamh came to help get him ready for the day, chatting amiably about the party the night before.

He wondered if Eirwen had seen her before she left, but the maid betrayed nothing.

He headed down to the dining hall for the breakfast buffet, dutifully taking his place beside his mother. Guests from the night before trickled in one by one.

"Good morning, Mother," he said, as brightly as he could manage. His words tasted like bile.

"Good to see you up, dearest. I take it you had a pleasant night?"

"Perfectly so. You?"

"Can't remember much towards the end, so it must have been!" She laughed, digging into buttery eggs. "Mmm, delightful!"

A few hours ago, she was confessing to murder. She remembered none of it. Cole shovelled toast into his mouth, but it was dry and flavourless.

Someone flounced into the seat next to him. A plump, big-eyed young girl with an impossibly bright smile. He recognised her. Maria? Mary?

"Good morning, Your Majesty, Your Highness!" she said cheerily, loading her plate with food. "I trust a pleasant evening was had by all?"

"Quite so, thank you," the Queen replied.

Cole repeated the sentiment, although the lie tasted more bitter the second time around.

"My name is Marie," the girl whispered to him, as his mother turned her attention to the Duchess of Pigna. "In case you forgot. Did you sleep well, Your Highness?"

There was a glint in her eye, as if she knew he hadn't spent all of it alone. Had she seen Snow leave his chambers? Had– had she recognised her? If she mentioned anything to his mother–

His stomach churned. "Very well, thank you," he said breezily. "Yourself?"

"Your beds are just as comfortable as when we used to use them to build forts."

"Forts?" he frowned. "We?"

Marie grinned. A memory trickled back; she was a friend of Eirwen's. Did she know she was still alive? Had she helped her slip away last night?

"You're–"

"Delighted to be back in court, after such a long time away. I may prolong my visit, things might finally be getting… interesting." She added yet more food to her plate. "You know, I think I'm going to take this up to the library. I started a fantastic book last night. Feel free to join me after breakfast, if you wish."

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Cole did not join Marie Von Transinberg after breakfast. In fact, he avoided her for several days. For all he knew, she was a spy sent by his mother. He was desperate for news of Snow –so desperate he considered riding out to meet her several times– but he wasn't about to risk his or her safety by approaching this relative stranger.

Once she and the other guests left at the end of the week, he could ride out into the woods alone. It would be poor etiquette to do so before then, not to mention suspicious.

One morning, a servant slipped him a note as he passed him in the corridor.

Meet me in the orangery at noon, in the blue rose grove.

It was signed with a picture of a snowdrop, nothing more.

He was as jittery as a damp log on a fire, waiting for the moment to come. He had no idea what he wanted to say to her, what he wanted to do or ask. Was it even safe for her to come?

But Snow did not appear. Marie Von Transinberg did.

"You," he said.

"Me," she grinned. "Dramatic, right?"

"You… you sent the note?"

"I did."

"But you signed it with–"

"Indeed. I wasn't sure you'd come otherwise. You've been doing a wonderful job of avoiding me."

"Why… why do you want to talk to me?"

"Our mutual friend wanted me to speak to you. She spoke to me before she left, you see."

"You… helped her get out?"

"I helped her get *in*."

Cole frowned. It seemed plausible. She would have needed someone's help getting into the castle through the front door.

"You and she were friends."

"We still are, although I'm not sure I've *quite* forgiven her for disappearing on me for all those years."

Silly as it was, Cole found he shared that sentiment. Yes, she had good reason not to tell anyone, least of all him, but he would have liked to have known she wasn't dead.

"What did she want you to tell me?"

"Mostly she wanted me to check you were all right."

Cole's chest clenched, gripped by an unfamiliar warmth and an old kind of guilt. She was far too good. Too good for him. "What… what did she tell you?"

"Not much, but it wasn't hard to piece together. So, what are you going to do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Marie, lowering her voice even further, "are you ready to take a stand?"

"Against my mother?"

"Know any other tyrannical monarchs in the vicinity?"

"Fair point." Cole sighed. "What… what would I need to do?"

Marie shrugged. "I'm not sure. Are you free tonight?"

"Nothing's been arranged. Why?"

"We're going undercover. Meet me by the servants entrance one hour after dinner."

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Straight after dinner, Cole arrived back at his room to find a pile of plain clothes folded neatly on his bed, together with an instruction to change. He did so diligently, meeting Marie by the back door at the allotted time, feeling thoroughly uncomfortable. She was dressed in a simple maid's attire, her skirts frayed and patched, her brown hair covered by a cap.

She sighed when she saw him. "No."

"No… what?"

"You're far too clean. You stick out like a sore thumb."

"I'm wearing the clothes you sent!"

"It's not enough." She leaned down into the flower beds and scooped up a handful of mud.

"What are you doing with that?"

"What do you think?"

"You're going to put that on my face, aren't you?"

"Don't worry, Prince," Marie smirked, "it'll wash off. You'll be just as handsome tomorrow as you are now. And Eirwen won't mind what you look like."

Cole's heart thumped, his chest tightening. He still wasn't sure where they were going, hadn't been entirely certain Snow would be there at all. It took him too long to realise what Marie had just said. "Why should I care what Snow thinks of me?"

Marie grinned. "Why indeed?"

She slapped the mud in his face, streaking it across his cheeks, through his hair, into his fingers, finally wiping off the remnants on his clothes. Cole tried his best not to cringe.

"Better," she announced finally. "Now come on."

Niamh met them at the gate.

"You're coming too?" Cole spluttered.

"Of course!" She pulled up his hood, lowering her voice. "Keep your head down. Your face is well-known. Try not to look anyone in the eyes."

"Yes ma'am," he said.

She linked her arm in his.

The three of them moved through the dark streets at a brisk but unhurried pace, Niamh steering the way. Eventually, they arrived at a tavern. Niamh went round to the back entrance and rapped on the door. A big, burly man with slug-like eyebrows answered it.

"The snowdrop waits in the forest," Niamh whispered.

The man said nothing, moving aside and gesturing to a set of steps in the corner leading into the basement. They walked down silently. A small stage had been erected at the end, crates laid out like benches. A dozen or so people were already there. Cole recognised a few on sight– servants from the palace?

If his mother were here now…

"Sit," Niamh instructed. "Say nothing."

The two of them followed her instructions. One by one, a few others trickled in. Many wore cloaks or masks. There were definitely a couple of nobles amongst them, and he was suddenly thankful for Marie's decision to streak him with mud. They stood out far too well in their pristine garments.

"Is that Lord Hammersmith?" he whispered to Marie.

"I think so."

"He's an ally? Or a spy?"

She shrugged. "No way to tell. But try not to reveal yourself."

Cole nodded, but his legs couldn't stay still. He kept searching for Snow. The room was full now. She could easily have slipped in without him noticing. He recognised some of the dwarves though. The one who shot him was by the stairs, examining everyone that came in.

Finally, the grumpy, one-legged dwarf hobbled up to the platform and banged his cane for silence.

"Greetings, countrymen," he began, the room falling to a quiet hush, "I am glad to see so many of you, so many that are prepared to risk their lives for the sake of their country. I am Onyx, a simple wood dweller, but I come before you today asking for your aid. I will not beat about the bush; we want to dethrone Queen Bianca and take back the kingdom."

A murmur washed over the crowd.

"So, what do you propose?" asked a peasant. "Take the Queen down, and then what? Appoint her son? Word is he's not much better."

"Well, that hurts a little…" said Cole under his breath.

Marie kicked him.

Onyx shook his head. "We have someone else in mind."

"Who?"

"Me." A small figure stood up from the crowd and stepped up to the platform, dropping her cloak to the floor. Dark waves sprung round her shoulders. She was wearing a white shirt and leather armour, simply but carefully dressed, half girlish, half warrior.

There were a few gasps. She might have disappeared from view years ago, but she had been a public figure until then, and the blue rose sitting in her hair was an excellent touch.

"I am Princess Eirwen of Aberthor, rightful heir to the throne. Five years ago, my stepmother tried to have me killed, but I survived. If you will help me, I will take back our kingdom. I will free us from Queen Bianca's rule, and I will strive to guide our people into a future where no one fears the winter… or the monarch."

A hush fell over the crowd.

"Well, she's got my vote!" Cole whispered.

"Ssh!" hissed Marie. "That's not how this works!"

"But how do you plan on doing any of that?" another asked. "Queen Bianca won't give up the throne willingly."

"I wasn't planning on asking her nicely," said Eirwen sharply, making Cole grin.

"We cannot divulge any plans just yet," Onyx added, standing next to her. "The purpose of this meeting is to get a sense of numbers, and to ask you to seek out anyone else who might be willing to take a stand, knowing that the princess lives. Tell no one you do not trust."

The crowd turned to one another, exchanged rushed words.

"Do we have your support?" Onyx asked.

Niamh was first to her feet. "You have mine," she said.

Marie was next. "And mine."

Another stood up. "Whatever I can do, I will."

"Me too."

"And me."

One by one, everyone rose, Cole included. Snow met his eyes briefly. She should not have been surprised by his presence or his support, but that minute gesture, her simple smile, seeped into his skin.

Something crashed overhead. There was a shout, a loud scream, the sound of something being wrenched open.

Bang.

The doorman came tumbling down the stairs with a bullet in his chest.

"Guards!" yelled Wren. "Run!"

The room erupted into desperate cries. Another bullet went off. Wren removed a crossbow from her back and fired upwards. Another two of the dwarves backed her up.

The cellar hatch was thrown open, but three metal helmets from the palace guard glared down at them.

Before they could aim, Cole snatched up one of the crates and hurled it into the space, catching

them off guard just long enough for someone else to impale one of them on a sword and yank him to the ground.

"Eira!" hissed Onyx. "Run!"

Eirwen was still standing on the platform, staring at the chaos unfolding around her, while Onyx tried to tug her towards a door in the corner of the room. She was rendered immobile.

Not thinking about Niamh and Marie, Cole sprung to her side. He grabbed her face.

"You need to go," he told her. "Run today, fight tomorrow."

"Duck," she said.

"What?"

She shoved him aside, swinging a sword over his head and cutting the arrow streaming through the space his head was clean in two. A guard rose towards her, but she twisted out of the way of his strike and stuck him neatly in the underarm with a dagger.

The blood on her blade gleamed. She stared at it, bewitched and horrified.

"Go," Cole urged again, drawing his own sword to cover her. "Hurry!"

This time, she let Onyx tug her away.

The path to the cellar hatch was clear. Cole turned, searching for Niamh and Marie. They were huddled in a corner, the maid shielding the girl with her own body.

"Come on!" he barked. "Move!"

Niamh dragged Marie to her feet and shoved her towards the exit. Cole pushed them out, glancing around the room at the bodies piling up, and the flagstones sloshed with blood. No wonder Eirwen had paused. He had never seen anything like this.

Niamh clutched his arm. "You can't be found here," she said.

"But the others–"

A horn sounded in the distance. More guards were coming.

"Come!" she snapped.

Cole followed her, pulling Marie's arm, fleeing through the streets into the dark. The sounds of the brawl were inescapable, permeating the stone, every once silent crevice stuffed with sound.

They did not stop until they were nearing the castle gates.

"*No,*" Niamh moaned.

"What is it?"

"They've locked the gates and changed the guard."

"So?"

"They knew about the meeting. Somehow, the Queen knew. She's changed the guard to one she trusts, one who'll report any servants returning to the castle in a hurry after the meeting."

Cole swallowed, catching her meaning. "Servants," he said, "but not me."

He swept off his cloak and placed it around Niamh's shoulders, drawing up the hood. He draped his arms around both women. Marie was trembling.

"It's all right," he told her. "Just follow my lead."

He pulled them out of the shadows and into the dim light.

"Halt!" a guard cried out. "Who goes there?"

"Calm down, old chap, it's only me."

"Prince… Prince Cole! What are you doing outside the grounds?"

"What do you think?" he said, gesturing to the two women by his side. "Collecting some halfway decent company. Forgive the mud, won't you? We took a little tumble on our way back…"

"Where… where have you been, Your Highness?"

"Oh, some lovely little tavern on the outskirts of town. What was it called? *The Hanging Duck? The Snowy Tiger*?"

"*The Why Knot*," said Niamh, presumably giving him the name of a pub in the right location that would be too rowdy to confirm their tale.

"*The Why Knot*!" Cole hooted. "Ever been? Lot of fun. Let us in, will you? I seem to have misplaced my cloak and it's getting rather chilly."

"Of course, Your Highness! At once!"

The gate swung open and the three of them marched inside, Cole swaying slightly to keep up the rouse. Not wanting to draw any more attention, they crept in through the kitchens.

Cole turned to the two women. "Are either of you hurt?"

They shook their heads.

"Marie? Are you all right?"

"Um, a bit shaken," she replied, fidgeting with the end of her braid. Her cap had come loose in the struggle. "Wishing I'd stayed home and read instead. But I think I'll be all right."

"Go directly to your rooms," Niamh insisted. "I'll be up to collect your clothes in a bit. Go."

Cole escorted Marie back to her chamber. "You're very good at lying," she said. "I'm not sure whether to be suspicious or impressed."

"Years of putting on a mask," he said.

"For who?"

"Everyone." The answer should have been obvious. What royal was ever truly themselves with anyone?

Although no mask compared to the one his mother wore…

"Were you frightened?" she asked.

"Terrified."

"Eirwen looked scared too." Marie's voice was light. "But you both wanted to stay."

"It… it didn't seem right to leave when we were capable of fighting."

Marie looked down. "Thank you for getting us out."

"You're welcome."

"Goodnight."

She closed the door softly, and he returned to his own room, taking off his clothes and scrubbing the mud from his skin and hair. Niamh came up not long after, with a bottle of wine and three goblets. He frowned as she set them down.

"I think you've miscounted."

She poured him a glass. "A trail of evidence, should anyone look into your story."

"You think of everything."

"I do what I can."

She gathered his discarded garments and slipped out the door. Cole lay on his bed, trying not to shiver, drinking the wine until his hands felt steadier and trying to ignore how the colour matched the bloodstains on the cellar floor.

Chapter Ten:

The Captive and the Queen

Bianca paced around her room in a gown of black lace, her thick hair tumbling around her shoulders. She'd tugged it out of the elegant weave in frustration.

"Why aren't they back yet?" she hissed at the Mirror.

"Patience, My Queen. They are coming."

"You are certain they found the right place?"

"I am certain."

Someone thumped on the door. "Your Majesty! We have news."

"Enter!"

The Mirror faded back to normal as two guards barged into the chamber, dragging a man behind them, his face beaten and bloody.

"We interrupted a secret meeting," said the guards. "Many fled, a few were killed. This one we managed to capture alive."

"Interesting," said Queen Bianca. "Hold up his head."

One of the guards yanked the prisoner by the hair and twisted his face towards the Queen. She recognised it. A lesser noble.

"Lord Hammersmith?"

The man let out a sound that was half sob, half whimper. "Please, Your Majesty, have mercy! I was curious, only curious! I wanted to see if the rumours were true–"

"Rumours?" The queen narrowed her eyes. "What rumours?"

"They… they were saying that this time, the rebels had something new, something different. A tool of some kind–"

"A tool? What kind of tool?"

Lord Hammersmith blinked the blood from his eyes. "Your Majesty… Princess Eirwen is still alive."

Queen Bianca stumbled backwards, her body stiffening like ice. "No. No, that's not possible."

"I saw her with my own eyes, Your Majesty. It was her. The mirror of her mother–"

"Silence!"

The guards dropped Lord Hammersmith to a crumpled heap on the floor as Bianca twitched about the room, her eyes falling to the empty mirror.

It cannot be. It is not possible. He told me she was dead, and the Huntsman–

The Huntsman.

"Guards, please escort Lord Hammersmith to the dungeons. He shall be executed in the morning."

Lord Hammersmith whimpered. "Your Majesty, please–"

One of the guards jerked him to his feet, but the other looked uneasy. "Without trial, Your Majesty?"

"The man is guilty of crimes against the Crown. There is no leniency for treason."

"But he is from a noble family–"

"He is guilty of the same crime I executed a man for last month! Should I make an exception because of his *wealth*? Would that be *fair,* guardsman?"

The guard hung his head. "No, Your Majesty."

"Then do as I say! And summon the Huntsman. He and I must speak."

"At once, Your Majesty."

The guards left the room, dragging the quivering Lord Hammersmith behind them.

Bianca wheeled back to the Mirror. His face rushed back to the surface.

"You told me she was dead!"

"I told you she had vanished from my sight. I could not tell if she was dead."

"How could you not sense her?"

"I am… unsure. It is not easy to hide from my sight. It's possible she was shielded by those around her."

"What do you mean?"

"A large enough group of dwarves could mask her from me. They are so pristinely unmagical that they can sometimes act as barriers from magical vision. That seems the most likely explanation."

The Queen stared at him.

"I cannot lie to you, My Queen."

"Would you, if you could?"

The Mirror did not reply.

There was a knock on the door once again, and the Huntsman was shoved into the room. He bowed down before her.

"Leave us," she said to the guards.

The guards vanished.

The Huntsman started to rise. "Stay down," the Queen insisted.

He knelt again.

"Tonight, a group of rebels were intercepted in the city."

"A great relief, Your Majesty."

"Is it?"

"Well, that you found them."

"For me, yes, I suppose it is."

"I… I don't follow, Your Majesty."

"I just imagine you are rather disappointed that I found them at all."

A pause. "Why would I be disappointed?"

"Because among their number was a girl claiming to be Princess Eirwen, and you must have some interest in keeping her alive, since it was you that was supposed to have killed her. I can't imagine a child got the better of you, so tell me, *loyal* Huntsman… why did you let her go?"

She waited for the blubbering, the begging, the pleading for mercy. A false claim of loyalty, like all of the others over the years. Instead, the Huntsman merely sighed.

"Because she didn't deserve to die."

"She *needed* to die!" the Queen screamed. "She needed to die so that I could keep what is *mine*. I will not allow her to steal from me."

"It was never yours to take."

The Queen lashed out, smacking the Huntsman with the back of her hand and cutting his cheek with her ring.

"You don't get to decide what is mine," she spat. "No one does. Not any more."

The Huntsman stared at her, his gaze unafraid.

"I'd kill you myself," she said, "but I don't want the mess in my bedchamber. Guards, remove the Huntsman from my sight."

They did not have to drag him out. The Huntsman rose to his feet and left without another word, far more still and quiet than the Queen. She rushed to her desk, picked up a glass bauble, and hurled it at the door. It smashed into dust. She sank to the floor, her limbs shaking.

She had trusted him. Of all her servants, she had trusted him the most, and he… he had done this.

And Princess Eirwen was still alive.

But not for much longer.

"Mirror," she said, "as soon as you can, find out where the rebels will be meeting again. I think I should send the little princess a gift…"

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It was late when Cole finally rose the next morning, having spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, unable to digest his thoughts or scrub the scene in the tavern from his mind. Food felt like the last thing he wanted, but he stumbled down to the nearly-empty breakfast table nonetheless.

The room seemed darker somehow, the conversation more subdued. When people rose to greet him, it was with the same fleeting expression that the servants often used. What had happened?

His mother sat at the end of the table, signing papers. He cast a cursory glance over them, noticing the familiar black seal.

His stomach clenched, but he sat down and forced his face into a mask of indifference.

"Really, Mother? Another execution? It's not even midday."

"Can't be helped, my dear," she said, scribbling her signature. "A band of rebels was intercepted last night. One of the culprits was caught."

Cole's insides lurched. "Anyone I know?"

"Lord Hammersmith, would you believe?"

No wonder the nobles looked so spooked. They were usually spared his mother's wrath, turned a blind eye to it when her ruthlessness lined their pockets. Now none of them were safe.

"I see," he said, unable to summon much else. "Did he… tell you anything of note?"

"Yes," she said, pursing her lips and lowering her voice. "It appears that the person leading the rebels was none other than your wicked little stepsister."

Cole feigned shock. "What?"

"I know. She must have been behind these attempts the entire time. Heaven knows what she's been doing all these years, but do not worry, my darling, she won't succeed. No one will take our throne from us." She raised a hand to his cheek. "Are you all right, dear? You look awfully pale."

"A late night," he said, forcing a smirk. "And a lot of wine."

"Oh, I see!" She laughed, shuffling the papers. There were at least two black seals amongst them.

"Will anyone else be joining Lord Hammersmith on the chopping block today?"

At this, the Queen's eyes narrowed. Her jaw tensed. "Yes. My Huntsman. It turns out he's been in league with the princess all along."

The Huntsman? He had not been there last night. How had his mother deduced his involvement?

Because he was the one supposed to have killed her.

Eirwen had kept the identity of her saviour a secret, but Cole should have known. He was the one who returned the palace the day she was supposed to have died, covered in blood, with a tale of a wild animal devouring the princess he'd desperately tried to save.

What had he done, to protect her? He'd stayed close to the Queen all of these years, knowing, surely, that it could not last.

If Eirwen heard he'd been killed because of her–

"No," he said.

His mother looked at him sharply. "What?"

"Don't kill them yet."

"Whyever not?"

"If I were Snow, I think I'd be rather attached to the person who saved my life. Attached enough to try and rescue him. It would be the perfect opportunity to capture her, or flush out her supporters."

The Queen smiled. "What a sharp mind you have, my darling boy. You'll make an excellent king one day."

No, he thought, *I won't. I cannot be king. Not ever. I cannot risk becoming like you. I won't be a killer. I won't be a monster. Not for you, not for anyone.*

He stood up. "You know, Mother, I have the strongest desire to go for a hunt," he said swiftly. "If I may? I shall be back before dinner."

"You've not yet had breakfast–"

"I'll have the servants wrap something up for me," he said. He bent down to kiss her cheek, but the warmth of her skin chilled his bones. "Fear not, Mother."

Chapter Eleven:

The First Gift

Eirwen did not get up when the rest of the household did. She lay awake, staring at the blue rosebuds on the gossamer curtains, trying not to think about the night before, and failing.

Don't think about the blood.

Her blade flashed before her eyes.

Don't think about that being the first time you truly wounded another human.

His body sank to the floor.

Don't wonder if you killed him.

Was he still moving when you ran?

Don't think about the fact you left them there.

Thirty people. Thirty people had cared enough to come, had been willing to support her. How many of them were dead, now? Could she have saved any of them?

Marie, Niamh and Cole were there. Had they gotten out safely? Cole was a skilled fighter, she remembered that from their sparring days, but against that many guards…

His mother would never have let any harm come to him, but the other two were another matter.

She clasped her hands together and uttered a silent prayer to any higher power that might be listening. *Let them be safe. Whatever it costs me.*

As the dwarves dispersed to start the morning chores, she slowly slid from her covers, dressed, and headed downstairs. Only Garnet was still around. She sat herself down at the table and chomped through the bowl of porridge that had been left for her, each bite making her stomach churn.

Garnet tidied up around her. "Is there any point telling you that there was nothing you could have done?"

Eirwen shook her head. "Please, just give me something to do."

Garnet muttered something, sighed, and summoned a pile of clothes that needed mending. It was the perfect activity; focused and useful.

Let me fix things instead of breaking them.

Lunch was a muted affair, and she was glad for the true silence again after it was over. Even Juniper and Ivy knew that something was amiss, but a sharp glance from Garnet hushed them.

Shortly after most of the family had dispersed again, there was clattering over the bridge. Voices, Oakley and Merry rushing out to greet someone. Eirwen rushed towards the door before it flung open, and Cole stumbled in, red-faced and panting hard.

"Cole!" She raced to steady him, grabbing his arms. "What are you–"

"There's, there's trouble–"

Eirwen froze. *Marie, Niamh. "*Is anyone in imminent danger?"

"No. I don't think so."

She exhaled. "Good," she said, pulling him towards a seat by the fire.

"No, not by the fire, I'm too hot."

He tugged at his cloak. Eirwen helped him remove it, plonking him down away from the hearth. He took off his outer layer too, and was halfway to removing his shirt before Eirwen stopped him.

He flashed her a weak smile. "Would it be too much for you?"

"You will soon realise it's not warm. Keep it on."

Garnet poured him a tankard of ale and handed it to Eirwen. She pressed it into his hands, rubbing his back. “Breathe. Drink. Take it slow.”

He took a sip, half choking on it.

“Did you run all the way here?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. I was on horseback, but I was worried that I was riding the horse too hard so I left him in a glade next to a stream not too far away–”

Onyx grumbled something about the recklessness of abandoning your mount, and hobbled out of the room to go fetch it.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

He grinned. “Maybe I just wanted to see you.”

“All right, you’re fine.” Eirwen scowled, dropping away from him.

Cole grabbed her arm. “On a serious note,” he said, “my mother has imprisoned the Huntsman. She plans to execute him in a week.”

Eirwen paused, but somehow, Wren’s pause was harder, her face like iron.

“I see,” Eirwen continued. “Why… why so much time?”

“Because I convinced her to delay it, to try and force you to reveal yourself.”

“I can’t work out if that’s smart or idiotic.”

“Me neither. But it was the best I could do on short notice. She wanted to do it immediately. I had to delay her.”

“Quick thinking.”

“One of my finer talents…”

Wren sat down at the table beside Cole. She looked up at Eirwen. “What do you want to do?”

“You mean, because he’s only one man and we shouldn’t risk it?”

“Lord Hammersmith is set to be executed too,” said Cole, “although risking several lives for two is little better. What was I thinking?”

“You wanted to give them a chance,” said Eirwen.

“I feel like I’ve just given you a burden.”

She placed her hand against his arm, shaking her head. “If you have, it was still the right call.” She turned back to Wren. “I want to try and rescue them, if I can. Don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

Eirwen swivelled to Cole. “Have you eaten? You look pale.”

“Ah, no. I, er…”

Eirwen slipped into the kitchen. Wren bustled outside to find Onyx, leaving Eirwen and Garnet to fuss over feeding the prince.

“I’m not… particularly hungry,” Cole said, when a plate was pressed in front of him.

“Me neither,” said Eirwen. “But you look like you’re about to faint. Just try a few bites.”

“Shall I trade you for–”

“Finish that sentence, and I will punch you.”

Cole snorted, stuffing a small bite of bread into his mouth. “It amuses me how you can go from kind to cruel in such a short space of time.”

Eirwen glared. “It’s one of my finer talents.”

A short while later, Wren returned with Onyx, and they shared the news with him. He went very quiet for a long moment, staring intently at the table.

“If we’re breaking into the castle, I say we go after the Queen too,” Onyx declared.

Eirwen blinked. “Are you serious?”

"Why not? Two birds, one stone. If we er…" He glanced sharply at Cole, "If we remove her from power, all our problems are solved."

"So… do you have a plan?"

Onyx stared at a knot in the table. "I'll have one in a week. For now, we need allies. As many as we can get."

"I imagine Lord Hammersmith's family will be willing to lend support," Cole said. "If they hear about Eirwen."

"I imagine a lot of people will rally behind her, if they know about her," said Onyx.

"Onyx?" Eirwen frowned.

"It's time you came out, pet. Showed the kingdom you're alive, and willing to fight for them."

"And… how will we do that?"

"With a small but significant gesture," he said. "Give me a few hours."

"I should get back to the palace," Cole said. "But please… anything I can do, let me know."

"You may regret those words, boy."

Cole swallowed. Eirwen got up when he did. "Let me walk you to your horse, at least."

He did not stop her. Instead, he flashed her a grateful look, although he sank into silence that didn't ease even as they readied his stead together.

"Something else is weighing on your mind, isn't it?" she asked.

Cole's dark eyes flitted away from her.

"My mother," he said eventually. "Whatever Onyx has planned, I… if, if it's at all possible, can you spare her?"

Eirwen stared at him. "You think I could kill your mother?"

"After all she's done, I would be surprised if you didn't want her dead."

"That may be, but she is still your mother. I… How could you forgive *me* if I killed her?"

"Because she deserves to die," Cole said, his eyes glassy, his voice wound as tightly as wire. "I know this. But…"

"She's your mother."

"I don't… I don't want her to die."

Eirwen reached across the saddle and found Cole's hand. She laced her fingers into his. "I will do everything in my power to ensure she survives," she said. "You have my word."

Cole groaned, tearing his eyes away from her and leaning his head against the side of his sword. "You're too good."

Eirwen swallowed, not sure anyone could ever be too good, not sure she could be called that when all this was over.

"Cole…"

"Yes?"

"When this is over, if… if you ever think I'm being corrupted by power, if I'm using it for selfish reasons, if my people ever come close to fearing *me,* do you… do you think you could stop me too?"

Cole's fingers tightened around hers. "That won't be you."

"Can you promise me anyway?"

"I'm not sure I'll have the strength to do this twice."

"Please, Cole."

"All right," he said, "I promise you. But you need to do everything you can to make sure that never, ever happens."

Eirwen nodded. “I promise.”

∞∞∞∞

Two days later, Eirwen was in the city again, Wren, Oakley, Merry and Onyx behind her.

“Are we absolutely sure this is the right course of action?” she asked again.

Onyx nodded. “Have I ever steered you wrong, child?”

“What about the time you told me to investigate that hole?”

“Learning experience.”

“Or that time you left me to fight those three shades on my own?”

“I’m a ‘sink-or-swim’ kind of teacher–”

“What about that time she almost drowned in–” started Wren.

“All right, all right! That’s enough. I’m sure on this one, child. Do you remember your words?”

Eirwen pressed the paper in her breast pocket. She’d been repeating them from last night until this morning. She nodded fervently, trying to swallow her pounding heart.

“You’ll be fine.”

“And if you’re not…” Wren patted the crossbow on her back, and pointed to the pistol at her side. “I’ll have you covered.”

Merry held up a long wooden pipe. “We’ll try the less lethal options first.”

Eirwen nodded once more, exhaled carefully, and stepped out into the square.

Her target was the grain store, a tall, round building, guarded by only two men. Taking out two was easy enough –especially with Merry’s darts– but the aim of this was *not* to do things stealthily. The aim was to draw attention.

A quick scout had revealed four more guards within easy distance. There would be no way to do this without drawing their wrath. She just had to hope the dwarves managed to take them out before they reached her, or the countless citizens she was about to draw into the fray.

The pounding in her chest grew louder. She wished she didn’t have to do this bit alone.

The door grew close. The guards sensed her approach and tightened their position, drawing their spears across the entrance.

“Halt!” they said.

Eirwen swallowed, hoping she wasn’t trembling. She tried to make her voice as loud as possible. “I wish for you to open this door to the public.”

The guards snorted.

“By whose authority?”

“My own.”

She flung back her cloak, revealing her face, her dark hair made up in a grand style and studded with blue paper roses. The effect was instantaneous. A quiet gasp went up from the crowd.

“I am Eirwen, Crown Princess of Aberthor, and I order you to open this door.”

“It… it can’t be…” said one of the guards. “You’re… you’re supposed to be dead.”

I get that a lot.

“Five years ago, your queen tried to have me killed. Now she threatens the life of the one who spared me. She is a murderer and a tyrant, and I will take back what is mine, on behalf of my people. Now, I command you again… open these doors.”

The guards stared at her, utterly immobile.

She drew her sword. The crowd behind her whispered and murmured.

"I have other ways of making you listen."

One of the guards shook slightly. "Forgive me, Your Highness, but… we cannot budge on any but the Queen's command."

"You can't be serious," said the other. "She's not… she can't be–"

Something struck him in the neck, something so small and minute, it was barely visible. He clutched the spot like one would an insect bite. His knees started to wobble.

"What…" He dropped to the floor.

The other guard looked around in a panic. Eirwen pressed her blade against his throat, her fingers inching towards the keys on his belt. "You can tell the Queen I knocked you out," she said, and jerked her head to the side.

The guard dropped his spear, and moved away.

Eirwen slid the key into the lock and opened the door. A strange, whispered silence passed over the crowd, like she was opening the door to another world, one of gold and silver.

"Halt!" A voice cut through the veil of silence. "In the name of the Queen!"

Eirwen turned to face the guards amassing at every corner of the square. She smiled at them as calmly as she could. "I am the queen."

The square erupted into chaos.

Wren fired her pistol into the air. The civilians scattered like peas, shooting off into every corner. One guard was downed by an arrow, another by Merry's darts. Eirwen did not wait for the rest to bolt across the cobbles towards her; she streamed into the building, barring the door behind her, paying no attention as they hammered at it. She seized a bag of grain and raced up the stairs, emerging on the platform above the square.

This was why Onyx had chosen it. Not just for the act, but the visibility.

"Citizens of Aberthor," she cried across the chaos, "your queen would have you starve, would deny your family sustenance while she gorges on luxuries that you can only dream of. I know those luxuries. But I know hardship, too. For five years I have lived as one of you, and I promise, if you help me take back the throne, you shall not go hungry again while I grow fat. Fight for me, fight for yourselves."

She tossed the bag of grain to the ground, where it split and poured out white silver. People ran forward in droves, scooping it up with their hands, into bottles and bowls. She grabbed another bag, and another, and another, emptying out the store into the streets.

If only a few heard her, it would be enough. If only a few chose to rise up now, or spread the word, it was enough.

Let Bianca hear. I am coming for you. You cannot stop me.

∞∞∞∞

Bianca fumed about her chamber, screaming at the mirror and hurling things at the wall.

"That little wretch! Why did you not inform me of her plans?"

"The dwarves' protection still shields her from my sight, My Queen. It cannot be helped. I will only learn of her plans once your citizens do."

"Tell me; did her words reach them?"

"Yes, My Queen."

"Will they rise up against me?"

"I cannot yet see."

She smashed her fists against the desk.

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter!"

Eirwen's old maid walked in, pale and shaken. Her eyes darted around the room. The mere look of her, a remnant of that girl's life within these walls, made Bianca want to scrub her from existence. But Cole liked her, and so she had to stay.

"Ah, you," said Bianca. "Did you find anything?"

The maid trembled. "Your Majesty got rid of most of the Late Queen's possessions, but…" She removed a small comb from her apron pocket. "I was able to locate this for you."

Bianca seized the comb from her pocket. It was opalite, pretty, definitely a trinket worthy of a queen. Irresistible. Perfect.

"Very good," she said. "You may leave."

The maid looked only too thankful to be dismissed, scurrying away like a frightened mouse.

Bianca wheeled round to face the mirror. "A recipe for poison," she said, "have you found one?"

"I have one that can be attached to an object, yes."

She held up her treasure.

"Perfect."

∞∞∞∞

The dwarves did not return to the homestead. They went back into the forests, found a meadow large enough for their needs, and erected several tents. Then they sent Wren back into the city with a message for its citizens, an invitation to join them and pledge their support to their newly returned princess.

For a few hours, nothing happened. Eirwen paced about the field a great deal, searching for something to do whilst the dwarves drank themselves into a stupor. What if no one came? What if guards did?

Only Onyx seemed to sense her unease, and stayed sober with her.

Before nightfall, a handful of people arrived, followed by a dozen. They bowed before Eirwen and promised her whatever aid she required. Onyx recorded their names and addresses, and said they'd be in touch. Most had to return, but a few wanted to stay.

"I do not wish to return until the city is truly ours again," said one. He was a youngish man, almost as tall as Cole but twice as beefy. "Let me stay, Your Highness. Put me to use."

Eirwen looked desperately at Onyx, but he looked away from her. *Your call, Princess.*

"Very well," she said, "if that is what you wish. Arise, young… er…"

"Wistal, Your Highness."

"Wistal. I am honoured to have you. Wren," she gestured to the huntress, "can you find Wistal something to do?"

"Is he a good drinker?"

"Wren…"

She sighed. "Very well, young buck, come help me skin these rabbits."

"Yes, ma'am."

He bowed awkwardly at Eirwen and went to join Wren beside the fire.

Onyx crept up to her elbow.

"Did I do all right?" Eirwen asked.

"Perfectly. How are you?"

"I already miss the cottage."

She wondered how long it would be until she returned there. If the coup went as expected and they took back the castle… it could be a long time.

She had not said a proper goodbye to Garnet, Juniper and Ivy. She hadn't wanted to act like anything was dangerous, hadn't wanted to give weight to those fears.

"We have another visitor," Merry declared.

It took Eirwen's eyes a while to focus in the dark, but a familiar face dipped into the light of the fire.

"Niamh!"

She was so very much the person she wanted to see, and had barely known it until now. She leapt off her seat and into her arms. "Niamhy! I'm so glad to see you."

The maid smiled, patting her back. "I am so glad to see you too, Princess. I cannot stay for long. I'll be missed at the palace. But I brought you a gift."

"A gift?"

She drew out a small box from inside her cloak, wrapped in black ribbon. Eirwen opened it carefully. Nestled amongst the paper was a beautiful comb.

"It was your mother's," Niamh said. "Isn't it lovely? It will look perfect in your hair."

"Oh, thank you!" She threw her arms around her again.

"You will wear it?"

"Of course."

Niamh smiled. "Good," she said. "I really must away."

"Won't you stay, just for a little bit?"

Niamh patted her cheek, her hands ice-cold. "I cannot, Princess. But don't worry."

"Be careful!"

Niamh turned to face her, her smile shivery. "I always am."

She disappeared into the dark.

There was something strange in that look, but Eirwen couldn't put her finger on it. Perhaps it was just the way the shadows had fallen. She shook her head and unwrapped the comb, lifting it to her dark cascade of hair.

She turned back to Onyx.

"Well? How does it look?"

"Very pretty," he confirmed, with the faint flicker of a smirk. "But then, you usually are."

"Onyx…"

"Bah. Look at me. One day away from my wife and I'm already channelling her. I'm getting soft and sentimental in my old age…"

A wave of dizziness washed over her. Her head throbbed. Was she standing too close to the fire? She backed away, tumbling into something. She wasn't sure what. Her limbs were losing sensation, her legs numb.

The floor spiralled up towards her. "Onyx…"

Her chest felt tight. Colour was dribbling away. What was wrong?

Someone was screaming. Voices, fraught and wretched, the wrong note on a violin.

"Oakley– *OAKLEY! Grab something, quickly–"*

Hands all over her, patting her down. The screaming was getting worse. Something was wrenched from her hair.

Eirwen.

A voice, a voice in the crowded dark, telling her not to go.

Hold on, little dove.

∞∞∞

Cole had spent the day avoiding his mother and had instead gone down to 'help' the guards with the incident at the granary. He confiscated the keys and may have 'accidentally' left the place unlocked.

The grains had been picked clean from the street. Cole couldn't imagine a hunger like that.

He wondered if Eirwen could. The dwarves didn't look like they went hungry, but there could have been harsh winters in the past where the forest yielded little. He hadn't asked. He hadn't wanted to.

So many questions he'd never wanted to ask, because they'd spoil this comfortable view of the world. Never again.

Not wanting to return to the palace, he pulled up his cloak and headed to a tavern. It was alight with gossip of the princess' spectacular return.

"Are you sure it was her?"

"Does it matter? Anything's better than the Queen, at this point…"

"She won't follow through with her promises. That lot never does."

"Shouldn't we give her a chance?"

"Can we afford not to?"

"She was mesmerising…"

Despite himself, Cole grinned. He wished he could have seen it, her inspiring words, her black hair whipping in the wind, her blue eyes blazing. Mesmerising indeed.

His smile continued all the way back to the castle, until he bumped into Niamh, white-faced and red-eyed.

"Niamh? What's wrong?"

She pulled him into a nearby storeroom. "Where have you been?"

"It doesn't matter. What happened?"

"Your mother, she… she ordered me to find something belonging to Eirwen or her mother…"

Cole frowned. Such trinkets were rare, his mother having sold everything of value and burnt everything without. Only a few pieces remained, one of which was in his quarters. Had Niamh–

"I didn't know what to do. I gave her a comb a noble left behind, something that Queen Alba might have used… I thought maybe she had some way of enchanting it, that she was going to use it to guide her to Eirwen's location, but–"

Cole froze. "Where is my mother now?"

"That's just it," said Niamh, "she… she disappeared for a few hours. No one could find her, and no one saw her leave, but… I just heard her in her room, talking to herself. She was… she was laughing."

For a moment, Cole's mind went blank. *No. No, it couldn't be…*

"I'll go talk to her," he said. "I'm sure that… I'll talk to her."

It took all of his self-control not to run into her chambers, to keep himself steady and focused as he walked to the door.

The laughing echoed down the corridor, brimming with shadow. It was almost inhuman.

"Mother?" he said, closing the door behind him.

Bianca danced towards him, seizing his hands and twirling under his arm, her face still twisted in a grotesque picture of wild joy.

"You seem awfully cheerful, Mother, given what happened earlier–"

"All taken care of, my boy, all is well now."

Cole stiffened. "What… what do you mean?"

"I mean, my darling, that I snuck into their little encampment myself and gave the little princess a gift she couldn't refuse."

Cole forced himself to smile, although every muscle fought against it. "By yourself?"

"If you want something done right…"

He wondered if there was more to it than that, if she didn't trust her guards after the incident with the Huntsman. But that was not what he needed to know.

"Oh, pray tell, Mother, whatever did you do?"

"I disguised myself as that silly old maid of hers, and gave her an old comb of her mother's laced with poison."

"She… she took it?"

"I couldn't stay to watch, alas, in case they realised my deception. Oh, how I wanted to see that girl squirm…"

The fire in his mother's eyes chilled him. How could she enjoy this, killing a girl? Those were the same eyes that watched him with adoration, the same lips that sang him to sleep as a child.

What happened to you?

"I… I'm going to send someone to this encampment in disguise," he said. "To confirm she's dead."

Don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead…

"Such a wise boy," his mother crooned. "The camp is in a glade about a mile south of the pedestrian bridge. Tell them to hurry!"

"I… I will."

He backed out of the room, only holding his pace until he was out of sight of the guards, before racing to the stables.

"Ready my horse," he barked at a hand, "quickly now!"

Eirwen, Eirwen, Eirwen...

Chapter Twelve:

Shadows in the Night

The screaming dissipated as if claimed by some kind of fog. Light clouded over. Everything was hazy and dark. Some sensation remained; a burning, a frantic pulling at her clothes, a pain in her jaw.

Then nothingness.

Slowly, the face of a ghost emerged in the gloom.

Papa.

He was hand in hand with a woman, a woman whose face she had never seen animated. She smiled at her now, sadly and without reproach.

Mother.

They moved back into mist. Eirwen reached out a hand to follow them, but went nowhere. It was not time. Not now.

A voice was calling, frantic and desperate and crawling with pain.

"Eirwen! *Eirwen!* Is she all right? Where is she? Let me see her–"

Cole.

She wanted to call out, but her voice was hoarse. *I'm here, I'm here, don't worry–*

A pressure reached her, a warmth, a pull tethering her, pinning her down.

Then blackness once more.

∞∞∞∞

Eirwen woke up under a canvas ceiling, her head splitting, her throat raw, like it had been punched from the inside. It was still night, but a torch burned in the corner, illuminating a tall, slumped form dozing on a seat.

"Cole?" she rasped.

He jolted back to consciousness, blinking rapidly. "Hey. You're up. How are you feeling?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard my mother was planning something, and came to try and stop it. I was too late, I'm afraid, but luckily Oakley saved you with this weird stone?"

"A bezoar. Can cure most poisons, if you're human. I found one Under the Mountain years ago. They're worth a small fortune but Onyx said we should keep it just in case… anything like this happened, apparently."

"Onyx is quite knowledgeable."

"Well, he's very old. I might be as smart as him if I live that long."

Her fingers shivered against the sheets. *If I live that long.* If it wasn't for Oakley's quick-thinking and Onyx's forward-thinking, she would not be here right now.

Cole took her hand. "I'm not going to let her hurt you."

"What if you don't have a choice?"

Cole looked down. "I don't think I want to go back there," he said. "I think I'd prefer she knew where my loyalties really lay. I hate having to smile and lie to her, and see her face when… but I

suppose I'm useful to you there, right?"

Eirwen stilled. "If… if you really don't want to–"

He shook his head. "I think I have to. I think I stand a better chance of being able to protect you that way. I'll just have to pay more attention in future."

"You really care about the kingdom, huh?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "and you."

Eirwen blinked, but the action soon dissolved into coughing. Cole scrambled for a mug and pressed a drink to her lips, rubbing her back.

"Cole?"

"Yes?"

"You… you really don't seem as bad as I remember you being–"

He cut her off, snorting. "Well, thanks."

"So, why… why were you so awful to me when you first came to Aberthor?"

Cole paused, turning away from her and running a hand through his hair. "Because I *was* awful. Because I was a spoiled child who suddenly for the first time in his life had no say in anything, and I was wrenched away from everything I knew and I hated it. And you being so kind somehow made me feel worse, because you'd had this huge upheaval in your life too and you handled it *so much better*. You were nice when I couldn't be and I hated you for it. And your father… your father cared about you. Mine never did. And Mother was growing stranger and further away by the day. I was jealous and stupid and foolish, and I'm not sure a day has passed by since you left that I didn't regret what an utter and complete ass I was." He looked up at her, his dark eyes like shining gems. "I'm… I'm really sorry, Snow. Eirwen. If there's a way I can make it up to you–"

Eirwen placed a hand to his lips, holding them there for a fraction longer than was necessary. "You're doing a pretty good job now," she said. "And… and you can still call me Snow, if you like. It's kind of growing on me." Her fingers fell to his hair, brushing it from his eyes. It felt like satin beneath her fingertips. "Thank you for staying with me."

He smiled, leaning into her touch. "Just returning the favour. That and no one else would have you."

She raised an eyebrow.

"All right, fine, I actually had to fight for this seat. Your grumpy dwarf-dad finally said I should be the one to sit here because I'd be less trouble that way and had absolutely nothing else to offer. Which, not going to lie, stung a little."

Eirwen snorted. "That sounds like him." A yawn forced its way past her jaw.

Cole lifted a hand to her cheek. "You should try and get some more sleep. It's a while yet till dawn."

She half wanted to ask if he would still be there when she woke up, but she knew he had to return. What she didn't know was why the thought bothered her so much. It wasn't like he was in danger. She just didn't like the thought of him not being *here*, and she didn't like that he didn't want to be there, either.

She slid back down into the bed. Cole's hand stayed on her cheek, brushing back her hair.

"Are you going to sing me a lullaby?" she grinned.

He chuckled. "It's tempting, Princess, when you look this sweet, but I'm not sure I'd do the task justice."

She closed her eyes, trying not to fixate too much on the skim of his fingertips against her hair, or the unfamiliar softness in his voice. "You have a nice voice when you're not using it to tease me,"

she whispered.

He smiled. “That isn’t what I meant,” he said, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “But goodnight, Princess.”

∞∞∞∞

His chair was empty when she finally rose the following morning, and a coldness had crept into the tent.

It’s just the start of winter, she told herself. *Nothing to do with him not being here.*

She pulled on the rest of her clothes and drifted outside. Half a dozen people raced up to greet her. Oakley sat her down within seconds and checked her over.

“How do you feel?”

“A little dizzy. My throat hurts.”

“Sorry about that,” he said, “I wasn’t exactly gentle when I shoved the bezoar down there. It’ll clear up in a couple of days.”

Merry came forward and handed her a steaming mug of hot whiskey, honey and ginger. “Drink that,” he said. “It’ll help.”

Eirwen took it gratefully, and before long the two men returned to what they were doing before. Onyx stomped towards her.

“You all right?” he snapped, as if Eirwen was somehow to blame for last night’s events.

“Yes.”

“Good.” He sat down beside her. “That boy of yours came last night.”

“If you mean Cole, I would hardly call him ‘that boy of mine.’”

“Hmph. He was in quite the state when he heard what happened to you.”

“We spoke. I’m sure he’s gotten over it.”

“He likes you.”

“I am distinctly likable.”

“I don’t mean like that.”

Eirwen turned away sharply. “I’m sure you’re wrong.”

“Doesn’t happen often.”

“What about the time with the one-armed apothecary and the monkey–”

“Anyway,” he snipped, “you should be careful there.”

“Careful about what, exactly?”

“Precisely.”

Eirwen groaned. “You are impossible.”

“Aye, that I am. I’m just looking out for you.”

“Fine.” She drank the dregs of her cup. “How’s the plan of yours coming along?”

“It’s coming,” he said. “Complicated slightly by the fact the Queen now knows our location.”

Eirwen shivered. “I know,” she said. “That… that wasn’t Niamh last night, was it?”

Onyx shook his head. “Not if the prince is to be believed.”

“So she can disguise herself as anyone.”

He nodded. “We need to be more careful. Vet anyone that arrives into the camp–”

“The truth ring,” Eirwen said.

“I’ve already sent Wren to get it.”

"How… how did she know where we were to begin with?"

"Another good question," he said. "Someone could have told her, of course. But I wonder if she hasn't some other means of finding you."

"If that was the case, she would have come for me years ago, wouldn't she?"

Onyx did not meet her gaze.

"What? What is it?"

"I'm just thinking. It's no matter, not yet."

"You'll tell me if it's important?"

Onyx raised an eyebrow. "Of course, Your Highness."

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They moved the camp lest the Queen try something else and spread the change of location. For the next two days, people arrived in dribs and drabs to offer their allegiance, all of them subjected to the ring of truth before being granted an audience with Eirwen. Onyx decked out one of the tents with furs and fine furnishings, impressing upon his young charge the importance of appearing the part. Eirwen felt it made her look too much like Bianca, but he was insistent.

"They need to see you as a queen. Don't give them room to see you as a child, or one of them. Not yet."

Onyx interrogated every arrival, wanting to know their every skillset and ability, in order to better plot a rescue attempt.

Two days before the execution deadline, Marie appeared in the camp. She was dressed in travelling clothes as she raced out to embrace Eirwen.

"Are you all right?" asked the princess.

She nodded into her neck. "I can't dally. I'm due back home. I've left my carriage not far away. I tried to extend the stay but Papa wouldn't hear of it. I think he knows things are going to get… dangerous." She inhaled. "I've been writing to Lord Hammersmith's family, but they haven't replied. I'm not sure if they've written him off or if they're too afraid. I'll keep trying. I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you, Marie."

"I just hope you manage to take down the old witch and all of this is completely unnecessary."

"It's always good to have a plan B…"

Marie seized her again. "Please don't die again."

"I will avoid such an action if I possibly can."

Marie smiled, and pressed a letter into her hands. "From Cole, updating you on the situation with this mother. She's been furious. I'd be delighted if I wasn't so terrified."

Eirwen took the letter from her grip. It was neither sealed nor signed, as Cole could not afford for it to be intercepted regardless of the trustworthiness of the bearer. She thanked Marie again, had someone walk her back to her carriage, and went into her tent to read it.

Cole had drawn a snowdrop in lieu of a greeting.

I had to tell Her Majesty that you had survived her attempt and she was, putting it mildly, livid. I hope you've had the good sense to move your camp because I'm certain she'll try again. I'm sure you're taking every care to avoid detection and are thoroughly vetting each new volunteer, but be careful. She has spies somewhere, I'm sure of it. I frequently catch her talking alone in her room. I thought, at first, it was a symptom of madness. Now I'm not so sure.

I've asked her to let me help her, but she's keeping me at a distance. She tells me I'm a good boy and that she'll handle it. I will, of course, keep trying.

I once more urge Onyx to let me help with the escape attempt.

Take care, I hope we will meet again soon.

Eirwen took a moment to re-read the letter, as if searching for an extra line somewhere, some other secret message.

Am I genuinely searching for some silly, flirty comment from him? What is the matter with me?

She shook it away and went to inform Onyx of Cole's information. He was poring over a map of the castle, muttering under his breath. Wistal, who was proving very eager, stood by his side making notes.

Onyx scoffed at Cole's letter.

"You really should use him, you know," Eirwen suggested.

"How about we just ask him to poison her, and be done with it?"

Eirwen froze. "I am not asking Cole to poison his mother."

"It's the easiest solution."

"Would you have poisoned yours?"

Oakley stared at her. He had never spoken about his parents before. "No," he said. "Because somebody else got there first."

Merry looked up from his seat by the side, where he was whittling his brother another leg. It had a detachable foot, the end sharpened into a fine point.

Eirwen knew better than to press. "Cole can be a distraction," she said. "Or *something*. Please. Consider it. We're running out of time."

Something in Onyx's eyes flickered. "A distraction," he said, "or a hostage?"

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As night thickened, a few hours before the scheduled execution, Eirwen and a group of rebels ascended the mountain and slipped into the city.

Onyx kept the party small, taking only the princess, the dwarves, and a couple of willing rebels that were decent enough fighters. He would have foregone them altogether, but needed at least one person intimidating enough to feasibly hold Prince Cole hostage.

"You can't even reach his neck," he told Eirwen.

"Says the *dwarf,"* she snapped back. "And I can reach his neck. I need to be able to throttle him."

He was right, of course. It would not be believable if she took him hostage, and they could not afford to blow his cover.

Breaching the wall into the city was easy enough. It was not tightly patrolled anywhere but the main gate. Onyx and a couple of scouts had located and marked a blind spot earlier during the day. Eirwen went first up the rope, keeping a lookout for any guards, and the others followed swiftly.

Sneaking through the city was harder, the guard presence tightening the closer they got to the castle walls. It was slow, arduous work, Eirwen's heart leaping into her eardrums every time they were nearly discovered.

Merry took out the guards on the upper walkway with his darts. One body toppled over the edge. Eirwen leapt forward to cushion his fall–

Wistal raced out ahead, catching him in his arms and stumbling.

The guards on the ground turned towards them. Eirwen stilled, too surprised to draw her sword, but Onyx and Wren darted forward and clubbed the back of their heads.

"Are you crazy, child?" Onyx hissed. "That distraction would have been perfect!"

"I… I didn't want to see him hurt."

"He would have flattened you if Wistal hadn't run out. Use your brain!"

Eirwen bit her lip as Onyx rooted for the keys, and they slipped past the gate.

Moonlight covered the lawns, turning the grass blue and the water of the fountain silvery. The steady trickle was the only sound in the courtyard. Wren pointed overhead, noting the position of the guards on the walls, and tapped her wrist. They only had a few minutes until someone noticed the guards missing from their posts.

They darted through the gardens, hugging the shadows, clinging to the bushes and stone. No one dared to whisper. Onyx took the lead, though Eirwen was the one who knew these paths better than anyone.

They reached the doors to the dungeon block. Six guards were stationed there, a seventh figure trying to rope them into conversation. Cole.

"Anyway, I thought I better come down and check, you know? If they were going to strike at all, now would be the perfect time. Beautiful night, isn't it? Reminds me of a particularly fine night I once spent with the Marquise of Liore. Ever met her?"

Onyx motioned for Wren, Wistal, and one of the other rebels to move into position, getting as close as possible before Merry struck with his darts. He'd likely only get one in before the others caught on, two if he was lucky. Eirwen stilled, lowering herself to the ground as he gave the order.

Merry fired. Wren leapt out of the shadows, striking a guard in the back. Swords were drawn, flashes of silver in the dark. Eirwen raced forward as Cole slid underneath the wall the guards had formed around him, meeting her sword with his and allowing her to fling it away from him.

Well, not quite *allowing;* he still put up a fight.

She placed the sword to his throat.

"One of these days, I'll disarm you with more than my smile," he grinned, his voice low.

"I will stab you." She shouted to the guards, "Halt! I have your prince. I will not hesitate to run him through."

The guards paused, peering into the dark. Wistal abandoned the fight, hauling Cole to his feet and grappling him into a hold, a dagger to his back.

"Lower your weapons!" hissed Cole. "Now!"

The guards dropped their swords and spears. Within seconds, Oakley had wrenched them out of reach, and the remaining rebels bound and gagged them, stuffing them out of sight. It was unlikely the scuffle went unheard. They needed to move.

Onyx tossed the keys to Eirwen. "We'll keep watch, go!"

She descended into the dungeon, dragging Cole and Wistal behind her, Wren by her side with her crossbow ready.

Two guards met them at the bottom of the steps.

"At ease, gentleman," said Cole, "unless you want to see me splattered over the stones."

The guards stilled, glancing at each other.

"A poor choice of words," Cole said. "I'm sure I've done something to warrant people

wanting me splattered over the stones, but if you could lay down your weapons and not let me be splattered anyway, I'd really appreciate it. As would my mother."

The guards obliged. Eirwen leapt forward, unbuckling the keys from the belt of one of them. She pointed to an empty cell. "Get in."

They followed her instructions, and she locked the door behind them.

"Lord Hammersmith?" she called out. "Huntsman?"

"Princess?"

A haggard face rose from between the bars of a cell at the end of the room. His face was drained, pale as milk and thin as frost. His beard looked too big for him.

Eirwen swallowed.

"You could do with an ale," Wren said, filling the silence.

He smiled at her faintly. "You shouldn't have come."

"Maybe we came for the other guy."

A low moan sounded from another cell. "Is that you, Princess?"

"Lord Hammersmith? Are you unhurt?"

"I… have seen better days. But I can walk." He smiled at her gratefully. "Thank you, for coming for us."

"Don't thank us just yet," she said, working her way through the keys. "We need to get you out first."

The door clicked open, and she unlocked the Huntsman too. He picked up one of the guards' spears.

A few other prisoners stirred, alerted by the noise. Eirwen stopped.

Wren grabbed her elbow. "We can't waste any more time. And you don't know their crimes."

This was true. She could be freeing anyone. But given the Queen's penchant for imprisoning people for the smallest of crimes…

Why did two people deserve to walk free, and they didn't?

She called to one already awake, and handed her the keys. "We can't take you with us, but if you can get out on your own, then luck be with you."

Before she could reply, a cacophony pierced the silence outside. Half howl, half snarl. A chittering, guttural sound.

Wren stared at her, her face drained of colour. "It can't be…"

Not here. There was no way–

Another scream, human, wretched, filled with pain and blood.

"Run," Eirwen hissed at the party.

Abandoning all pretence that Cole was a prisoner, they bolted up the stairs, emerging to a courtyard awash with bodies. Onyx, Merry, Oakley and one of the others still stood firm, but the shadows were crawling, like spiders skirting the edge of the ceiling.

Shades. Dozens of them.

"It's not possible," Onyx breathed, his voice ragged.

They'd cut off every exit. There was only one route left.

"The castle," Eirwen said. "Come on!"

The shades streaked out of the darkness. The group bolted, following Cole and Eirwen. Guards rose from their stations at the doors, but stopped dead when they noticed their pursuers.

"Run!" Eirwen urged them. "Save yourselves!"

The guards did not stop them from fleeing inside, but neither did they abandon their posts. She

heard a short scream and the sickening crunch of one of them being thrown against the wall a few seconds later.

They burst into the entrance hall, but the shades were on them in an instant, cutting across the stairs and dividing the group. Eirwen turned to fight, swinging her sword straight through a neck and sending a head spiralling. Cole slammed his back against her, drawing a dagger. She panicked; in their haste, they had forgotten to pick up his sword. A dagger was of little use.

She jerked him to the floor and spun round, slicing his opponent through the chest and kicking it into a nearby suit of armour which clattered to the marble, grabbing its fallen weapon in her free hand and racing up the steps, cutting down foes as she went.

Onyx kept close to her, finishing the ones she downed.

She chanced a look at the others. Wren was backing into a corridor, Hammersmith and the Huntsman behind her. Oakley and Merry had flanked Wistal, and were barking instructions on how to fight creatures immune to pain.

“The kitchens!” Eirwen yelled to Wren. “Go through the kitchens!”

Another wave of shades burst through the doors, cutting them off entirely, a surge of black water splitting apart a dam.

Cole grabbed Eirwen's elbow. “Nowhere to go but up,” he said.

Getting into the castle had been the plan. Confronting the Queen had been the plan. Maybe they could still succeed. Maybe these shades would even do the job for them. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Yet Eirwen could feel any chance of success slipping through their fingers, smoke in the wind.

Cole shot to the floor beside her, letting out a strangled cry. A shade had grabbed his ankle. Eirwen swirled, throwing her axe into its face and grabbing him upright. They screamed down the corridor towards the throne room, reaching it just in time to slam the doors shut behind them. It groaned against the weight of the shades. It would not hold them forever.

A bolt struck the pillar beside Eirwen.

“Get away from my son!”

The Queen shot down from the dais in a gown of crushed green velvet, reloading her crossbow. “I will not ask twice.”

Cole inched towards the space between Eirwen and the loaded crossbow, before freezing. Eirwen tried to ignore the action.

“Step down from the throne,” Eirwen said, raising her sword to Cole’s back. “I will not ask twice.”

Cole raised his hands. The Queen's eyes narrowed. The shades hammered against the door.

Onyx aimed his own bow.

“Shall we see who is fastest, queenie?”

“It is not a matter of who is fastest,” said the Queen, “but who is outnumbered.”

She lowered her weapon, clicking her fingers. From behind her, crawling out of the walls, shades surrounded her. But they did not go for her. The shades moved straight for Eirwen's group.

“No,” breathed Onyx, “it’s not possible.”

A knight dived in front of their path, cutting down the first of the attackers.

“Run, your highness!”

He was not talking to the Queen, or even Cole. His gaze settled briefly on Eirwen.

“Fool!” hissed the Queen. “What are you doing?”

“She is the rightful queen,” he said. “I will not serve a pretender.”

The Queen screamed, firing her loaded bolt. It bounced off his armour as he swung his sword.

The room became thick with bodies, a haze of limbs and steel and black slippery blood underfoot. Eirwen's skin crawled with it.

They needed to get out. A few more guards had joined the fray, but they were vastly overwhelmed and she wasn't sure who was fighting for them or just against the shades. Cole wasn't properly armed. She'd lost sight of Onyx. If they couldn't fall back soon–

"Eirwen!" a voice screeched from the dark. Eirwen cut down another enemy and glanced a look in the direction of it. A narrow panel had opened up in the side of the wall, and Niamh's pale, desperate face was peering out of it, her hand outstretched towards them.

Eirwen grabbed the back of Cole's tunic and dragged him to the side of the room, flinging him into the passage. Niamh pushed Cole on ahead as Eirwen spun round, searching for Onyx. A crawling river of shades divided them.

"Go!" he hissed, backing towards the door, "I'll find my own way out!"

"Onyx–"

"*GO!*"

A bolt leapt out of the mass of bodies, sailing over her head. Niamh yanked her backwards. "Come on!"

Eirwen seized the door and yanked it closed, just as another bolt missed her elbow. She locked the door as Niamh slumped against the wall.

"Are you hurt?" Eirwen rushed. It was too dark to see.

"A scratch. Keep moving."

They stumbled forward in the dark, through the winding passage, the noises of the battle growing dimmer and further away. Eirwen prayed the others were safe, or that Bianca called them off when she realised her son was missing. Maybe she'd take Onyx as a hostage, a willing exchange.

They tumbled out into a corridor, Niamh collapsing on the floor.

"Niamh!"

"It's… it's all right."

Eirwen rolled her onto her back. A bolt was lodged in her middle. All blood, all feeling, all everything drained from Eirwen's body. She was a kite at sea, wrenched from the hands of a child. Untethered and drifting and utterly lost.

Cole levered Niamh into his arms and shouldered his way into a nearby room, Eirwen trailing behind him, barely conscious of what she was doing. He lay Niamh down on the bed and returned to bar the door. Eirwen's hands leapt to the wound. Niamh's stomach pulsed blood. Her clothes were thick with it.

"No, no, Niamhy, no!"

"It's all right…"

"How… how can you say that?"

Niamh raised a hand to brush her tears. "It's all right, little princess."

Cole came back to her side, crouching down on the floor beside her. "Niamh…"

Her second hand flew to his. "You children better play nicely, now."

His face was tight with pain. "We're not children anymore."

"You will always be children to me."

Eirwen gulped, choking down her tears. She clutched Niamh's hand as fiercely as she dared, crushing it against her forehead. "Please, Niamhy, please don't go…"

"It's all right…"

"Stop saying that! This isn't all right! This isn't all right at all!"

Niamh smiled. “I wish I could have seen you beat her, after all this. But that wouldn’t have been enough. I would always have wanted to see the next thing, too. I used to dream of dressing you for your wedding, you know, of being there to help you with your first child…”

“Niamh…”

“It would have been an awfully pretty baby. No, it still will be, if that's what you want. You’ll have everything in life that you want. And you’ll have others with you. You will never be alone.”

The tightness in Eirwen’s chest expanded. “I don’t want others. I want you.”

“You’ll be fine, my darling girl…” She turned to Cole. “And you too, sweet prince. You’re a good boy…”

“Niamh!” Cole’s cry was strangled.

“Take care,” she whispered. “Always, always take care, of…”

“Niamh?” Eirwen’s voice was a ghost, a tortured, echoed sound. It couldn’t have come from her. She wasn’t here. This was not happening.

Niamh did not reply. Her glassy eyes stared at nothing.

“*Niamh!”*

Eirwen shook her. *No, no, no, no…*

Cole slumped onto the floor, his hand still tangled in Niamh’s. The blood streaked over his face as he placed his head in his hands and shuddered into a sob.

“She’s not gone,” Eirwen gushed. “She can’t be gone. She can’t. Not after…”

I just got her back. Five years. A handful of conversations since.

Not her. Please. Not her.

“Eirwen…” Cole placed a hand against her shoulder.

“No,” she shrugged him away, “no, no, *no*!”

She punched his chest, struggled against him, over and over until her fists felt weak and rubbery and the breath choked out of her. She fell into his arms, a mass of blood and tears and hands.

There were sounds in the corridor, guards running, calling out.

“You have to go,” Cole said, untangling himself from her grip. It was like something being ripped from her. The frayed edges of where her body had been tied to his ached like shredded flesh.

Her fingers were still coiled in his clothes. “Come with me,” she said. “Don’t… don’t stay here alone.”

Cole tensed beneath her. “I want to,” he said. “I want to go with you. But I can’t. I need to stay. I need to get her to call off the shades and find out what her next move is.”

“I don’t care about that!” she hissed. “She can have the throne! She can have anything! So long as she doesn’t take anyone else…”

“She won’t kill me.”

“What if I’m not willing to take that risk?”

Cole cupped her face in his hands and pressed his forehead against hers. “Trust me,” he said.

“Do I have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice, Snow. It’s just not always a good one.”

He moved towards the door, but Eirwen’s hand shot out and latched onto his. “Wait.” She pulled him down to her level and whispered something in his ear. “Our current location. If you need to find us.”

“Thank you.” He opened the door. “The coast is clear. If I meet any guards, I’ll send them in another direction. Take care.”

“You too.” She leaned up and placed the ghost of a kiss on his cheek, and vanished down the

dark corridor.

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She didn't remember getting out of the castle, or how she breached the city walls. The entire journey back down the mountain to the rendez-vous point was a dark, bereft mystery.

Perhaps I phased through the stone, she wondered. It felt as though she could, as if she was no longer made of flesh but some insubstantial thing, a black, shapeless mass of nothing.

The first moment of clarity occurred at the base of the mountain, when her eyes locked with Onyx's. He was scratched up, his wooden leg was missing a chunk, his clothes ripped to pieces, but he was alive. She bolted into his arms.

"Did everyone escape?" she breathed into his neck.

"We lost one of the rebels, but everyone else made it out all right… including Lord Hammersmith and the Huntsman. Wren's taken them back to base."

"Good," said Eirwen, and then collapsed on the ground.

Chapter Thirteen:

Mirror, Mirror

Cole stumbled down the corridors, the stone still ringing with the screams from the battle. The shades appeared to have vanished as easily as they'd arrived, slinking off into the darkness. Guards were still running about, searching for them, or the rebels, it was impossible to tell.

Maybe he should have gone with Eirwen. She could have used him as a hostage. If she didn't get out–

No, no, she *had* to get out. The mere thought of her capture sent his thoughts spiralling into dark, dangerous territory.

Be honest, said a voice at the back of his head, *if it came down to it, what wouldn't you do to save her?*

He crushed the question, too afraid of the answer.

He reached the door to his mother's chambers. He could hear her screaming inside. "Show me my son!" she screeched at someone.

Cole paused, waiting for another voice, wondering at her command. How was anyone supposed to *show* him to her?

He rapped faintly against the wood, his knuckles feeling loose inside his skin. His hands were coated in blood, red and black.

His mother flung open the door. For a split second, Cole thought he saw another face over her shoulder in the dim light, but a moment later all was cast into shadow.

"Cole," she breathed, her eyes wide. Her hands went to his face, his shoulders, his blood drenched-tunic. "Cole–"

"It's not mine," Cole assured her, his knees shaking. It was a struggle to keep upright. How would Eirwen ever make it out? "Niamh, Niamh, she's dead."

"Who?"

Cole cringed. Niamh had served his mother for years. "One… one of the maids. She… she pulled me out of there." He stopped just short of saying '*us'*.

"But you're not hurt?"

"No, no, I'm not hurt."

She pulled him into her arms, stroking the back of his head like she did when he was a child. It was almost enough to make him dissolve, but bitterness kept him upright.

You did this. Somehow, you did this. Niamh is dead because of you.

"Mother… what happened? Where did those things come from?"

"A… a failsafe," she said. "A gift from an ally."

"That's not an answer! What were they? Where did they come from? How did you control them–"

"So many questions!" she half-laughed, steering him into a chair by the fire. "Sit down. Let me fetch you a drink."

She turned to the table and lifted a bottle of wine.

"I deserve to know, Mother! I could have died tonight–"

"Those wretched insurgents will be found and punished, I assure you."

"Did you catch any?"

"No," she snarled. "The guards are chasing them down, but they appear to have slunk off. Tonight, at least. I'll burn down the forest if I have to."

Cole suppressed a shudder, taking the goblet his mother pressed into his hands.

"Drink, my darling."

"I just want to know, Mother."

"You will, in time," she said, stroking his hair. "One day, everything will be yours, and you can do whatever you please."

"What if," said Cole, exhaustion gripping his body, "that's not what I want?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if I don't want this? What if I don't want to be king?"

His mother fixed him with a look, the kind given to children who've said ridiculous things and don't know what they're talking about.

"Why wouldn't you want to be king, darling?"

Because I'm scared I'll be like you.

"Forget it," he said. His mouth felt gummy, his tongue thick. "I'm just… I'm just tired…"

His mother kept stroking his hair, lifting the wine up to his lips, as his body grew heavier and heavier. His vision was sinking.

"Mother, what…"

"It's all right, dearest, Mother will make it all better…"

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That night, the first real frost of the year fell over Aberthor, dusting the forest with white. A great fog thickened over the landscape, shielding even the trees behind its eerie veil. The castle was claimed by it. Eirwen wondered if they'd have snow, and what that meant for Niamh's body. She had no family. How would her remains be treated? What would they do with that cold shell now that the warmth had been sucked from it?

She was silent all day. Silent as Lord Hammersmith thanked her profusely, and set off with Wren to seek safety with his family. She was silent as Onyx muttered, over and over, that the queen should not be able to control the shades, and everyone else chimed in with their theories. She was silent through every argument about what to do next.

She did not care. She meant what she told Cole. Bianca could keep the throne, as long as no one else got hurt.

But people would. Every person Bianca executed after this point would be on her. She might not know them, but they would be somebody else's Niamh. They could be someone else's everything. At least, for all she meant to her, Niamh was not the only person Eirwen loved. She was not alone.

So why did it feel like it?

"I should have prepared you," Onyx said. "This was never going to be done without bloodshed."

"You could never have prepared me for this," she said. It was the first thing she'd uttered since collapsing into his arms. "Nothing could."

"There will be–"

"Don't. Don't try to prepare me. It won't help. Nothing will!"

She marched off in the direction of her tent, and did not move until morning.

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Cole woke next morning in his own bed, utterly unsure of how he came to be there. The events of the night before rushed back like a wave, rolling layers of grief colliding into him.

Niamh. Niamh was gone.

He did not remember much of what happened after. His head was throbbing, his throat was dry, and he wasn't sure what was to do with grief and what was a result of whatever his mother had slipped into his drink.

"It was just to calm you, darling," his mother insisted when he questioned her about it. "Just to help you sleep."

Perhaps his anger was unwarranted. Perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps he deserved it after drugging her. But he couldn't help but feel the situations were not comparable. One, he had done it for the sake of a kingdom. She had done it for the ease, stripped him of his choices like one would a child.

No wonder I never felt ready to be king.

He heard from the servants that Niamh's body had been taken to a communal grave and buried along with the others before he even stirred. As he could find the strength, he went to the greenhouse, plucked a dozen blue roses, and left them on the mass grave. He tried to summon a few words, but they turned rubbery in his mouth. What could he possibly have said to her?

I'm sorry. I'll miss you. I'm so, so sorry.

He kept replaying the moment in his mind, trying to work out when the arrow struck, where it came from, wondering if he could have stopped it or shielded her or done something different, all questions Eirwen was certainly asking herself, wherever she was.

His gaze wandered down the mountain slopes, past the fields, and settled on the red wood beyond. He prayed to whatever gods looked over them that they would not be apart for long.

He remembered the first time he had ever spoken to Niamh. He'd seen her about, of course, following Eirwen everywhere, but he hadn't given her much thought other than to sneer at Eirwen that she was too old for a nursemaid.

She blinked at him. "Maybe," she said, "but not too old for a friend."

He wondered if it was a veiled insult. It was difficult to tell sometimes with Eirwen.

The day in question was a few months after he'd arrived in Aberthor. Winter had finally dispersed and the gardens were starting to bloom. A picnic had been arranged on the lawn. It was still too cold for his liking, but his mother seemed happy. She was stretched out on a blanket, chatting with Olwen.

How simple things were then.

The servants came out and laid the spread in front of them, all smiling at Eirwen as she thanked them, her beam as bright as a shaft of sunlight on a cloudy day. No one could possibly be *that* happy, surely? Especially when talking to servants.

Eirwen tucked into a jam tart. Followed by another. Then a third.

"You'll get fat," Cole spat. He didn't mind if she did, he'd never seen anything wrong with being fat, but he knew that it was an insult and he just wanted to wipe that ridiculous smile off her face because he was so sick and tired of her being so damn cheerful all the time when he couldn't be.

Eirwen stared at him, her gaze unreadable. Finally, she held out the plate. "Would you like one?" she asked softly.

Cole groaned, and got up in a huff.

Niamh, watching from the corner, giggled. No servant had ever laughed at him before. "What are *you* laughing at?" he hissed. He could threaten to have her dismissed. It probably wouldn't work. Eirwen was far too attached to her and she definitely held her father's sway more than his mother did at present. He wondered how long that would last. His mother had a way of making men adore her. A tiny part of him prickled in sympathy for Eirwen, if that was the case.

"They aren't poisoned, you know," said Niamh, with a smile that rivalled Eirwen's.

"What?"

"The tarts. They're quite delicious. You may cheer up if you have one. Maybe you're only grumpy because you're hungry."

Cole scowled. "I'm not grumpy."

"My mistake."

Cole turned back to stare at Eirwen. A couple of doves had landed on the lawn, and she was busy chatting away to them.

"Why is she *like* that?"

"Sweet? Cheerful? Friendly?"

Cole pursed his lips. "Yes," he said. "It's dumb. Why be like that to anyone, especially if they, if…"

Niamh nodded knowingly. "It's just her way, Your Highness. But if you want someone to be mean to you, I'm sure we could find a volunteer…"

"You're teasing me."

"Am I? Oh no. Whatever shall you do?"

"What's… what's your name?" he asked. He hardly knew why he was asking. He couldn't remember the last time he'd asked a servant their name. Not since he was a very young boy, before his mother told him it wasn't appropriate to play with the servants' children any more.

"Niamh."

"Is that another one of the stupidly-spelt names that have much easier ways of being written?"

A wry smile passed her lips. "Quite."

He practised the name under his breath. Niamh. *Neve.* Easy enough. He moved to go back to the picnic.

"Your Highness–" Niamh started.

"Yes?"

"Do let me know, if there's anything you need."

A dozen servants told him this every single day, but he knew this offer was different. This was *come talk to me,* this was *trust me,* this was *I'm here for you.*

And she had been. Every single day since that one.

But not any more.

It didn't seem possible that such a light could be snuffed out, that someone so bright could be extinguished in an instant, but she had been. The last bit of warmth, the faint remnant that had been left when Eirwen went, had finally dribbled away.

He could feel the cold again.

∞∞∞∞

The day passed in a haze. His mother spent most of it locked in her chambers, muttering to herself and rejecting all visitors. Cole knew he needed to get into that room, to work out who –or what– she was talking to, but the opportunities were scarce and his energy even less so. He felt like any warmth this cold place had ever held had been sucked away entirely.

The next day, he told her he'd take the rest of his meals in his room, and waited until she went for lunch. The door was guarded, but the servant's entrance wasn't. Niamh had shown it to him once.

The room was utterly quiet when he entered, stiff with silence. He walked around the room, testing it for hidden panels. At the far end was a curtain over a mirror. Cole had seen it hundreds of times and not thought much of it; it was one of the many treasures his mother had brought with her from Florin. It was only now he wondered… why did a mirror need to be concealed?

He pulled the rope. An impossibly pristine surface stared back at him. He'd never noticed the sheen of the glass before, like poured silver. He pressed his fingers to the surface. It was cold. A chill slithered down his spine.

"I don't suppose you're up for revealing any secrets, are you?"

Nothing happened. Cole turned his back.

"Hello, Prince Cole."

He spun round. His reflection had vanished. A white face remained, like a paper mask, its eyes hollow and empty.

"What… what are you?"

"I am as you see," said the voice, it was as deep and sharp as water. "A mirror."

"Mirrors don't usually talk. Or have faces of their own."

"I have many faces," the Mirror said, and the mask rippled, displaying a dozen different forms. "And many uses."

"What is your primary one?"

"I can show you anything, if you ask the question. Your deepest desire. A way to realise your ambitions. The path you truly seek."

"You helped my mother."

"I have been her companion for over twenty years now. I may one day be yours. Tell me, Prince Cole, what do you desire? Would you like to know how to gain it?"

A flash of black hair, a sweet smile, eyes that burned like ice.

"I am uninterested in my own desires," he lied. "Show me my mother's."

The Mirror smiled, morphing into an image of a red-haired man with a crown. It had been many years since Cole had seen his likeness, he had never quite forgotten it.

"Father."

The image focused on the crown, and then melted into another image; a young princess arriving at the castle that had been Cole's childhood home.

Mother? No, not her. Princess Bianca. The real one. The one his mother had taken the place of.

The Mirror showed him the back of a maid, creeping into Bianca's chambers with a goblet of wine. Cole didn't need to ask what was in it.

"Don't… don't show me what happens next."

"No?" The Mirror's face fluttered back to the screen. "How about this?"

Snow, thirteen years old, dancing in the gardens. His mother's eyes darted to a dagger on the belt of a knight. Had she thought about doing it herself?

"Your mother craved power. I merely showed her how it could be hers... and how to keep it."

"Snow. Snow had to die."

The Mirror nodded. “I cannot see the future, but even I could tell that your mother would never reign free while the Princess still lived.”

“Do you… do you work for my mother?”

“I follow her instructions, if that is what you mean.”

“I mean,” said Cole, choosing his next words carefully, “do you *have* to obey her?”

“I can only answer the questions I am given, and show what I am told.”

So there was no need for him to relay anything that transpired here today to his mother. He could ask this mirror anything. Anything. The possibilities were as endless as they were overwhelming.

“Well, Prince Cole? What would you like to know?”

“How do I stop my mother?”

The Mirror frowned. “Oh. *Oh*. I wasn’t expecting that! What have you been doing, Prince Cole?”

Cole said nothing.

“Did you know all along that she was alive? Or… did you find out only recently?”

“I thought I was supposed to be the one asking the questions?”

The Mirror’s face fell. “Very well,” he said. “But I’m afraid you will not like the answer.”

“Give it to me.”

“If you want to stop your mother, you will have to kill her.”

Cole’s heart plummeted. “What?”

“Your mother will never hand over the crown willingly. She will fight for it until her last breath. Your mother, or the princess. Which will it be?”

Cole’s gaze dropped.

“Interesting. That should have been an easy answer, your mother, or your former stepsister. Unless, of course, that isn’t what she is to you anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter what she is to me!” Cole snapped. “It matters what she can do for this country!”

The Mirror smiled. “One does not need to be an all-seeing mirror to spot a lie, my prince.”

Cole said nothing for a long moment. “The shades,” he said eventually, “how do I stop *them*?”

If he could work out how to take out them, at least, that was something. Something Snow could work with.

Unless he was willing to take his mother’s life himself.

It would be the lesser of two evils, wouldn’t it? Morally, probably, the right thing to do.

But he already knew he couldn’t do it.

Coward.

The Mirror paused. “The shades are dwarven in origin. They are shielded from my gaze.”

“Is that how Snow remained safe all these years?”

The Mirror nodded. “Any further questions, my prince?”

“No,” said Cole stiffly, “that will be all.”

Chapter Fourteen:

Into the Dark

When Eirwen woke the next day, someone was sitting beside her bunk, stroking her hair.

"Mama Gee?" Eirwen shifted upwards, hugging the blankets around her. Frost permeated the tent. "What are you doing here?"

Garnet smiled. "Onyx came to get me."

"When?"

"Last night."

It had been dark when they last spoke, and the cottage was not nearby. How long had he walked in the pitch blackness to bring Garnet to her side?

"Oh. He… he didn't need to do that."

Garnet patted her hand. "He thought he did. He told me... about what happened to your maid."

"Niamh," Eirwen whispered. "Her name was Niamh."

"I'm sorry, darling. Do you want to want to talk about it?"

Eirwen shook her head, but repositioned herself to lie her head in Garnet's lap. "Cole was there, too," she swallowed painfully. "And I left him there. I think Niamh was more important to him than I knew. And he's all alone up there…"

Alone like Niamh.

The memory of her pale face and bloodied body sliced through her, and rose up new waves of grief.

Niamh, Niamh, Niamh.

She let herself cry a little longer before getting up that morning.

∞∞∞∞

Garnet had bought Juniper and Ivy with her to the encampment. They ran about like puppies, questioning anything and everything, before Wren wrestled them into her makeshift armoury with the mission of sorting through their latest donations.

"Had someone bring a cartload of discarded bits from the palace," she said gleefully. "Lots of rusted blades and leather armour, a few arm guards and shin pads."

"Anything salvageable?"

"Armour's a poor fit us, but there's some that might fit you. And I'm sure Merry can rescue some of the blades."

Onyx was sitting by the campfire, staring into the embers. Eirwen took the log beside him.

"What now?" she said.

Onyx poked the fire with the steel tip of his cane, his gaze unwavering. "We need to figure out how she controls the shades. Any attempt to try and take her by force with them at her beck and call… will not end well for us. We were lucky last time."

It did not feel lucky, not to Eirwen. They had saved two and lost two. A poor exchange.

"We could attack during the day–"

Onyx shook his head. “You don’t think she’ll have allowed for that? She’ll haul herself up somewhere away from sunlight, somewhere they can protect her. We’ll never mount a force equal to the sheer number of the shades, not unless you inspire half the kingdom.”

Eirwen did not want to inspire half the kingdom. She did not want half the kingdom to die for her.

She inhaled carefully. “We need to go down Under the Mountain, don’t we? Find out where they’re coming from.”

“Yes,” said Onyx slowly. “I’m trying to figure out how best to do that.”

Eirwen went back to her tent and opened a letter from Marie.

Dearest Eirwen,

I have arrived safely back at my father’s estate and begin the odious task of convincing him to support your claim. He agrees in principle, of course, but he is not exactly a ‘man of action’ and as I am not precisely one either, the challenge is two fold. You are so lucky I adore you.

I’m enclosing my favourite books from the last five years, together with my notes on them. I’ve compiled a reading list in order of which you absolutely must read first because I’ve been dying to talk to someone about them for years. Particularly you. I doubt you had much to read where you were, so hopefully you’ll enjoy these when you take some time to relax. And please, please take some time to relax. You are the sort of person who forgets to eat when she’s on a mission and books feed your soul, Eirwen. They are just as vital for survival, in my not-so-humble opinion.

Also, as I’m no longer there to tease you about Cole, I’ve supplied another list which I’d like you to read every time he talks to you. Absolutely gutted I can’t stay to watch that *unfold!*

Take care. I hope we’ll meet again soon,

Marie

Eirwen penned a letter back, chuckling through the lists and vast volumes stacked on her desks, and tried not to blush too much at the mention of Cole. Silly Marie. It wasn’t like *that.*

Well, she’d thought about him a great deal since Niamh’s death. Wondered how he felt, if he was coping, if he had anyone to talk to, or be with, like she did. She strongly suspected Niamh *was* his person, and that made her feel…

Awful. Wretched. Like she’d abandoned him.

But she’d feel that way about anyone, wouldn’t she?

“Company!” called the lookout.

Eirwen exited the tent, hurrying over to the noise. Half-a-dozen people armed themselves as a dark figure drifted through the mist. Wren reached for her crossbow.

“Don’t shoot,” said a voice. “The once was enough.”

Eirwen bolted from her spot and raced into Cole’s arms, clutching his back tightly and balling her fingers into fists around his cloak.

“I’m all right,” he whispered into her hair. “You?”

She murmured something into his chest, wordless and painful.

"Oy, oy!" Onyx clacked across the campsite. "Ring first! He needs to be tested!"

"It's him," Eirwen insisted, drawing back. "I know it is."

Cole smirked, still standing very close. "I could tease you again, if you wanted another way to be sure? Compliment your ravishing beauty? Pull your hair?"

"Ring!" Onyx barked, glowering at him.

Ivy ran forward. "Here you go, Da."

He shoved it on to Cole's finger. "Who are you?"

"Prince Cole of Florin."

"What's your favorite colour?" Ivy jumped in.

"Um, blue."

"What kind of blue? Like, blue like the night sky, or ice blue, like Eira's eyes?"

"Eira's eyes, definitely."

Eirwen's cheeks felt hot, and the ghost of a blush rose in Cole's face, too. Ivy grinned wickedly.

"Do you think my sister's pretty?"

Eirwen placed her hand across his mouth and yanked off the ring. "He doesn't need to answer that."

Ivy pouted. "It would be nice to know, though…"

Eirwen seized his arm and dragged him towards her tent. Cole turned and mouthed something over his shoulder, but she didn't know what. Ivy giggled in response.

She sat him down on the bunk. "What are you doing here?"

"I wish I had something helpful to report, something useful, but I don't," he said. "The truth is, honestly, I just wanted to see you."

Eirwen blushed. "Oh, I… I see."

"You're the only one who… who understands–"

"Niamh," said Eirwen, with sudden realisation. "Of course."

"There's… there's something else, too. My mother has a magic mirror. It can show her almost anything. That's how she got your location before."

"That's… troubling."

"It looks like dwarves dampen its effects, but I'm guessing the Mirror could just tell her where someone who knew the location was, so… so I'm not sure you'll ever be that safe."

"That is bad news, but… thank you for bringing it to me." She looked up at Cole, only to find his eyes studded with tears. "Cole! What is it?"

"I don't want to go back there," he whispered hoarsely. "I don't want to go back to that place and look at her and lie to her and wonder what she really is and where my mother went and what I'm doing still loving this facade when I know there's a monster beneath and–"

Eirwen pulled him into her arms and dragged him down to her bunk. "I'm sorry," she breathed, "I'm so sorry."

Cole said nothing. He buried his face in her shoulder and wept while she stroked his back, whispering words of comfort as their grief unbound around them. They could have been there for minutes or hours.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why are you apologising?"

"Niamh," he said, pulling himself back. "You're here being so… *you* towards me, and you lost her too."

Eirwen took his hands. "We both did."

"I keep wondering if there was something I could have done–"

"Me too."

"And replaying it in my head."

Eirwen swallowed, a tightness forming in her throat. "Me too."

"I don't think I'm ever going to scrub it away, or stop blaming myself."

"Me neither."

"I know I should be grateful that she came to save us, and I'm sure… I think she would have done it even if she knew what would happen, but… I'm still so *mad*. I'm mad that she's gone and I'm not."

"Cole–"

"What? Come on, don't tell me you wouldn't have picked her over me."

Eirwen yanked her hands away. "That's unfair."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I… I didn't think."

"That's kind of your problem, isn't it?"

Cole said nothing, and the silence stung the air. She bit her lip, already regretting her words.

A bell rang. "That's lunch," said Eirwen, "will you be joining us?"

"If I'm invited."

"Of course."

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Cole stayed all afternoon, chatting with the rebels, who soon opened up to him after a few sparring sessions, and diligently took a lesson in rope-making from Ivy. For all that she giggled around him most of the time, she was a very strict school mistress.

Juniper sulked, helping Eirwen peel potatoes for dinner.

"Why is she being so silly with him?"

"Beats me," said Eirwen, biting her lips.

"He's not *that* handsome."

Eirwen said nothing.

"*You* don't think he's handsome, do you?"

"Um…"

"Eira!"

"He… looks a lot better now than he did when he was younger," she confirmed.

"Do you think I'll be handsome when I'm older?"

Eirwen smiled, patting his cheek. "You're already adorable."

He pulled a face. "Thanks, but I'd rather be handsome. And strong. And brave–"

"How about kind and patient and intelligent?"

"Those don't sound like much fun."

Eirwen laughed.

"It's a shame you'll be old by the time I'm an adult. I wouldn't mind marrying you."

"Gee, thanks for the offer."

"You're welcome."

"It's all right, Juni. I'm not sure I really want to get married."

"Why not?"

Eirwen paused. She'd thought of it, of course, in passing. More the idea of it, not the reality. It would be nice to fall in love, but she didn't see how that would work when she became queen. How could she know anyone wanted her for herself, and not the power? She barely wanted that power for herself. How could she trust anyone enough to share it?

"There are no human boys as cute as you, obviously," she said, ruffling his hair.

Juniper blushed.

Garnet marched up to them. "Those potatoes done yet?"

"Almost."

"Good. Has anyone seen Da?"

Eirwen shook her head. "Not for an hour or so."

"Strange."

She moved onto Wren, but was met with a similar response. Oakley hadn't seen him for a while either. Merry got up and disappeared into the tent. He emerged a few seconds later, white-faced and holding a letter. It was addressed to Garnet. His fingers shook as he passed it into her hands.

If Eirwen thought all colour drained from Garnet's face the minute she saw the letter, she was mistaken. The colour fell out of her when she started to read, turning her rosy complexion paper thin.

"Onyx has gone Under the Mountain alone," she said cooly. "He says he expects to be gone a while. I… I won't read you the rest." She turned to Merry. "Do you know where he might have gone?"

"I… I have an idea."

"Can you find him?"

"With a map, possibly–"

"Merry," Garnet's voice was hard, "I want you to follow him, and I want you to bring him back safely… so I can kill him myself."

Merry swallowed. "We've… I've never been that deep before. Not since I was a child. I'm not sure I–"

"He left an hour ago!" Garnet hissed. "He's not exactly the fastest mover! Catch up with him!"

"I have a horse," Cole interjected. "If you give me his direction–"

Garnet shook her head. "He'll have reached the entrance by now, and I wouldn't send you into that place alone."

"I'm going too," said Eirwen. "Don't try to stop me. I'm practically a dwarf when it comes to navigating that place."

"That's true," said Merry. "Come on. Let's get kitted out and hurry after him."

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Garnet and the twins got together a few bags of provisions, just in case they were delayed in returning. Wren sorted out the weapons. Oakley, Merry and Eirwen studied the maps, charting his most likely course.

"Why go alone?" Eirwen asked. "Why now?"

Merry shook his head. "I'm not sure. I was only a child when the Underground fell. I have so few memories of it. But Onyx…"

"He's such an idiot."

"Aye," Merry agreed. "But he'll have a reason."

“A dumb one.”

Eirwen memorised the map as well as she could before Merry rolled it up and packed it in his bag, and headed to Wren to get kitted out.

“Take some proper protection this time,” she said. “There’s a few bits your size.”

Eirwen helped herself to a pair of greaves and gauntlets, lightweight and easy to maneuver in. There was a leather breastplate that caught her eye, too, stamped with the royal crest. It was only appropriate.

Wren laced her in. “You look good.”

“It’s a perfect fit.”

Wren gave a mock bow. “All hail the warrior princess.”

Cole entered the tent. “Have you got anything in my size?”

“You’re coming?” Eirwen blinked incredulously.

“If you’ll have me.”

“Won’t your mother wonder–”

“Screw her. Make use of me. Please. I beg you.”

Eirwen would have hated being left behind. “All right.”

Cole flashed her a half-hearted smile, and took whatever Wren offered him. The Huntsman came in to grab a few pieces too, trying not to grin as Wren took her time buckling him in.

A few minutes later, the party was ready.

Garnet patted Eirwen’s hand. “Don’t do anything daft to save my fool of a husband.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Don’t push forward recklessly.”

“I won’t.”

“Be careful.”

“Yes, Mama.”

She turned her attention to Cole. “You have everything?”

Cole started. Evidently, he had not expected to be spoken to. “Um, yes ma’am.”

“Good. You watch out down there. Listen to the others. Watch Eirwen’s back.”

“Oh, I, er–”

“I know. That’s why you’re going in the first place.” She gave him a hearty wink and clapped him on the back.

Eirwen pretended not to have heard, and followed after the others. A cold chill burned through the air, a gathering darkness that whispered of something far worse than night.

Part Three:

They said: 'She dwelleth in some place apart,
Immortal Truth, within whose eyes
Who looks may find the secret of the skies
And healing for life's smart!'

I sought Her in loud caverns underground,--
On heights where lightnings flashed and fell;
I scaled high Heaven; I stormed the gates of Hell,
But Her I never found

Till thro' the tumults of my Quest
I caught A whisper: 'Here, within thy heart,
I dwell; for I am thou: behold,
thou art The Seeker--and the Sought.

--James H. Cousins--



Chapter Fifteen:

The Cavern

They reached the entrance to the mountains before nightfall and descended swiftly, hoping to catch Onyx's trail before he went too deep. Wren caught it quickly, but Eirwen looked uneasy, wriggling about like her clothes were too tight against her skin. Cole didn't know Onyx well, but the others were clearly concerned they wouldn't catch him.

"He trained me down here," Eirwen explained. "Half the time I was sure he could slide into the stone itself, he disappeared with such ease. If... he doesn't want to be found, I'm not sure we'll find him."

Cole paused, wondering if he should reach out and take her hand. "We'll find him," he insisted. "Or he'll be safe. I'm sure of it."

Eirwen nodded, but did not look him in the eyes. "I'm sorry for snapping earlier," she said. "I didn't–"

"Yes, you did," he replied. "But you weren't wrong. I often don't think."

Eirwen's gaze dropped even further. "I mean I didn't want to hurt you. And… and for what it's worth, I'm not sure if I would have picked her over you."

She hurried on ahead, eyes darting about, searching for any sign of her lost family member, oblivious to the equal amounts of warmth and fear she'd sent pulsing through Cole's heart.

If he were missing, Cole knew his mother would send people after him. She would not come herself. He wondered if Snow would come for him, and why he wanted her to, and if she'd come because she cared, or simply because she thought she ought to. It was difficult to tell with Snow.

But to compare him to Niamh, the women who'd raised her, Niamh whom she'd adored… it was hard not to hope she cared for him a little.

Then again, maybe she would just have picked him because that was what Niamh would have wanted.

You children better play nicely, now.

I'll look after her, he swore to himself. *You have my word, Niamh.*

He picked up the pace and trotted after her.

They did not speak much, especially as the trail led them deeper, but Cole kept close to her side, his mouth opening every so often, half-formed in thought.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

"Are we… not allowed to talk?"

"We don't want to draw attention to ourselves, if we can help it. Shades have excellent hearing."

"Right."

"Is the silence making you nervous?"

"A little bit, yes."

"You… you really didn't have to come."

"Yes," he said quietly, "I did."

Eirwen twitched, grasping her side.

"Are you all right?"

"I think Wren might have laced me up a bit tightly, that's all."

Cole's eyes glinted. "I'm happy to unlace you, if you like?"

"We should keep moving."

He shrugged. "If you ever need unlacing, my services are always available–"

"I am not talking to you."

They reached a fork in the tunnel. Something scuttled in the darkness up ahead, followed by a low hissing, clicking sound.

"Great," said Wren.

"Is that where he went?" asked Merry.

"Of course it is."

"Weapons drawn, everyone."

Pieces of sunstone were dropped around necks, freeing up hands for a potential fight. Cole drew even closer to Eirwen's side.

"Hoping I'll protect you, or the other way round, Prince?" Eirwen grinned.

"Careful, Snow, that's sounding suspiciously like flirting."

"Flirt later," Wren warned, "you need your wits about you."

"Sadly, Cole left those behind–"

"*Later, Eira."*

Cole grinned at Wren's reprimand, but said nothing.

Two shades appeared at the end of the tunnel, quickly followed by two more. Wren took out one immediately with her crossbow, but the others scuttled towards them. Cole raced forward, slicing the chest of one, Eirwen skidding under his arm and slashing across the legs of another. She kicked it to the side.

Another five appeared, another three. A shifting, shapeless black mass of oily limbs. Thick, gurgling breathing congealed in the air.

Eirwen swore, crushing her back against his and swinging her sword.

Wren charged through the masses, cutting them down left and right. She was a demented beast, a monster with the blade, half block of solid stone, half light as a feather. The Huntsman stared at her.

"Don't just stand there!" she hissed at him.

He drove forward, swinging his axe over her head and cutting down three in a single swipe. Wren darted underneath his arm, plunging her blade into their chests just to make sure.

"Impressive," they both said at the same time.

The shades kept coming.

"I'm blowing the tunnel," said Merry. "We'll go round–"

"Set the charges!" Wren hissed. "Quickly!"

Merry splintered from the band's side, leaping to the side of the tunnel. Cole covered him alongside the Huntsman as Oakley, Wren and Eirwen kept the shades at bay.

Something was wrong with Eirwen. Her swings were growing weak and loose, her legs shaking. Was she injured?

Merry started to lay a fuse, but Cole couldn't keep his eyes off Eirwen, even when a shade narrowly missed him.

"Ready!" Merry screamed. "Pull back!"

The party started to run back towards the fork, but Eirwen was lagging behind, stumbling. Cole broke from the party and sprinted back towards her, cutting down a shade at her heels.

"Eirwen!"

"I can't… I can't breathe…"

The tunnel started to shake. Chunks of rock split from the ceiling.

"You're in range!" Merry hissed. "Get out of the way!"

A large lump of rock crashed to the floor. Without thinking, Cole seized Eirwen and rolled with her, out of the way, into the other tunnel, as what felt like half the mountain gushed down from above.

The dust cleared. Cole pushed himself off Eirwen's trembling form. In the dim light of her sunstone necklace, he could see her pale face, her shallow, laboured breaths.

"Eirwen!"

"Can't… breathe…" She beat a weak hand against her chest.

The crest of Aberthor was stamped on her armour. It was an older version of it. His mother had altered it about two years ago, not that Eirwen would know that.

His mother. The crest.

Cole yanked his dagger and in one swift movement, severed the laces on the side of the armour, ripping it from her body and hurling it into the darkness.

Eirwen took a deep, gasping breath, and Cole gradually released his own.

"How… what–"

"Who sent you the armour?"

"I don't know. Someone stole it for us–"

"Somehow, my mother snuck on a little gift for you."

"How could she know I'd wear it?"

"It had the old crest, and it was made in your size. You picking it up sooner or later was a safe bet. It must have been spelled to get tighter the longer you wore it for, or when you ran into danger. Either way, it's off now. You're safe."

Eirwen's eyes drifted to the collapsed tunnel.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

No response. Her eyes widened.

He repeated the question. "Snow? Are you all right?"

"Y-yes," she said tentatively, flicking her gaze back to him. "You?"

He nodded, stretching his back. He definitely caught some debris when he was rolling out of the way, but it was nothing serious. He hid any wincing as he rolled back his shoulders.

Eirwen shifted upwards, letting out a low hiss and grabbing her thigh. There was a thin deep cut across it. Blood trickled to the ground.

"Gods," said Cole, "that's–"

"Going to need some attention. Help me up?"

"It's bleeding badly–"

"Oh, is it? I hadn't noticed." She rolled her eyes. "There should be a town along here. We can raid it for supplies."

"How far along?"

"Not far. Metres, not miles."

"All right," he said. He looped an arm around her back and under her legs, pulling her into his chest and sweeping her up.

"Cole! What are you doing?"

"Carrying you to safety in a spectacularly chivalrous fashion. No need to thank me."

"I wasn't… This is unnecessary!"

"Actually, this is a very good reason for carrying you. Luckily you're so short, eh? You barely

weigh anything at all."

"You won't say that after a few minutes."

His back started to ache by the time they reached the end of the tunnel, but he said nothing. They emerged in an underground town, what little he could make of it from the dim light of Eirwn's stone. A coldness hit him with the force of an iron blow. Something crunched underfoot.

"Is that–"

"Snow," Eirwen said. She pointed upwards. A sliver of moonlight and a snatch of a dark, inky sky shone overhead. "Part of the cavern roof fell through years ago, and the place is now open to the elements."

"It's freezing."

She gestured down the slope. "There's a safehouse nearby with some supplies in. Let's get inside quickly."

Chapter Sixteen:

Under the Mountain

The safehouse was little more than a slightly fortified, run-down hovel on the edge of the town.

"What's so special about this place?" Cole asked.

"It's in the direct path of daylight, most of the day," Eirwen explained. "Shades can't survive in the light."

"Not much help to us right now."

"No," she agreed, as he set her down. "Fill that bucket with snow and then bar the door."

Cole did so, double-checking the windows were secure as Eirwen riffled through the supply caches. She found a length of bandage, ointment, needles and thread and a flask of whiskey, which she used to sterilise the needle.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

She lifted off her sun stone. "Hold this to the wound."

"All right."

He couldn't watch as she cleaned and stitched. It was worse than when she was fixing him. She said nothing all of the time, keeping her gaze tight and focused. Cole could think of nothing to say to fill the silence, not until she was finished, and he saw the real fear in her face.

She glanced back in the direction of the tunnel, her face a white mask of a different kind of pain.

"They'll be fine," he assured her.

"How can you be sure?"

"If they're half as tough as you, they'll be fine."

Eirwen smiled weakly, and grabbed the bucket of snow. She'd used some to clean and numb her leg, but now she was wrapping wads of it in cloth.

"What are you doing?"

"Take off your shirt."

Cole grinned. "Usually, I'd be all too happy to oblige, but it is *rather* cold in here…"

She narrowed her eyes. "Your back."

"What?"

"You hurt it when the roof caved in."

"It's nothing. It isn't bleeding."

"Let me see."

Cole sighed, pulling off his cloak, his tunic, and finally his shirt. The cold air slammed against him, and he shivered uncontrollably, hugging his clothes to his chest. Eirwen turned him gently towards her, keeping her leg extended at an odd angle as she held the sunstone to this skin.

"Damn, Cole–"

"It's fine."

She placed the compress to his left shoulder blade, it was awful and soothing at the same time. He seethed quietly.

"You don't have to be brave."

"You are."

"Well, I'm exceptional."

"Can't argue there."

She held his gaze, her eyes burning in the stone's light, like sparks of fire. She did not look away, even as she slid the cloth to another part of his body.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Why are you so surprised when people are genuinely nice to you?"

"Come again?"

"I've seen you with the young women at court. They must whisper sweet words in your ear. Stroke your ego."

"Of course they do. And some of them are very, very good at it. But they're just words. They don't mean anything. People are rarely ever nice to me without wanting something in return." He tilted his head. "Apart from you, that is. When you're nice to me I know you mean it. Partly because you're so mean the rest of the time."

Eirwen snorted. She tied the compress to the worst of his bruises and helped him back into his clothes, her fingers stalling with the strings of his shirt.

"What now?" he said.

"We'll have to stay here overnight. I've got some pumpkin seeds, a few nuts, a bit of bread, some stale biscuits and a bottle of ale."

"A sumptuous feast," he said. "Let's start with the ale."

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Despite the cold, they could not start a fire. There was little to use as kindling and even if they could break down some of the furniture, they couldn't risk a fire drawing the shades to their location.

They drank half of the ale and as little of the food as they could manage. With the tunnel collapsed, it was a long way forward and back. Food would need to be rationed.

The ale held back the worst of the hunger for a while, and beat back the cold, but soon it was clawing at them again.

They headed into the back room and erected a tent of sorts over one of the beds. The cold permeated everything they touched. The stone felt like ice.

"I take it we're, er, sharing the space?" Cole asked.

"It's probably a good idea. For warmth," she added. "Don't worry, I'll keep my hands to myself.

"I make no such promises."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, of course, my lady."

They crawled into the space together, Eirwen placing the sunstone on the headboard and placing a cloth over it, enough to dim the light but not extinguish it. Their breath iced in the air. They curled up separately, hugging their limbs and disappearing under the furs they'd managed to salvage.

"I don't think I've ever been this cold," Cole shivered, his teeth chattering. "How did dwarves survive down here?"

"They're a hardy bunch, for starters, and these places used to be heated… and not open to the elements."

"Of course."

She trembled, trying to suck back a shiver. She was supposed to be tougher than this.

"Think it will take a while to sleep like this," said Cole. "Can we talk a little?"

"Sure. What of?"

"Were you happy, with the dwarves?"

"Yes. Of course." She was silent, wondering why he'd ask such a question. "Were you happy, at the castle?"

"I wasn't unhappy," he said.

She swallowed. "Cole?"

"Yes?"

"When was the last time you were really, truly happy?"

"Oh, I don't know. I imagine a lot of wine and dancing were involved, though."

She looked at him. "Please?"

"Dancing with you," he said, "the night you snuck into the castle. I was happy then. And when we played music together. That was the happiest I'd been in a long, long time."

"And... before that?"

"There... there were moments. There must have been. Riding in the woods–"

"Cole–"

"You chasing me through the castle gardens. With a sword. I think you started off angry but it turned into a game. It was the first time I'd ever felt at ease since arriving in the castle. And... and the first time I felt like I had a friend."

"Since you arrived?"

"Since... since ever, really."

"That can't be true. You must have guards, valets–"

"People paid to accompany you don't really make good friends," he said. "Even back in Florin I knew that every cook's boy playing with me was doing so because he was told to."

"I... I never thought that. Growing up. Everyone I played with–"

"Probably liked you. But then, you're a lot more likeable than I am."

"You're not... you're not terrible, you know."

He rolled over and laughed. "Goodness, Snow. What sweet words you throw at me. Be careful. I might just fall in love with you."

"And we're back to detestable again. That was short lived." She sighed, lying on her back and staring up at the fabric ceiling. "I don't understand. Why didn't you go back to Florin, if there was nothing for you here?"

"Because there was nothing for me there, either. Nothing but responsibility and better weather. If I was miserable, I figured I deserved to be, but at least I'd be miserable with the one person who genuinely cared for me, even if I could never explain it to her."

A lump rose in Eirwen's throat. "Your mother."

Cole could only nod. Eirwen shook her head, feeling guilty for the family she had found and the one he'd never had. The urge to offer herself bubbled up inside her. *Let me be your family.* But that was too much, too personal. Too overwhelming.

"Well, keep flirting with Garnet and I'm sure she'll adopt you. She has a thing for adopting strays."

Cole chuckled. "In a weird way, you were lucky to find them."

"I was," she said, "very lucky."

"It must be… it must be nice to have so many people in your life to care about. That care about

you."

"Not right now, it isn't," she said. "Now I wish I was alone and didn't care about anyone."

"Being alone isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Eirwen bit her lip. She had been trying to tug him away from that.

"Cole, I'm–"

"You're sorry my mother is a murdering psychopath who killed your father and destroyed your country?"

"Yes," she said carefully, "but I'm sorry for you because of it."

"You don't have to be."

"I think, maybe, that I do."

He stared at her, his eyes so wide they looked like chasms. Ravines with glassy depths. No longer stung by the intensity, she wanted to slide into them. At the same time, she was afraid. Terribly afraid.

"It's the price of caring about people, you see," she continued. "You have to be sorry for them sometimes."

Cole swallowed, almost imperceptibly, as if he couldn't stomach the words she'd just uttered.

"Are you all right?"

He glanced away from her sharply, turning his face in the opposite direction. His eyes gleamed briefly in the low light. "I'm… er… thank you, Snow."

Eirwen shuffled closer in the bed, draping her arm around his middle. "It's for warmth," she said. "Unless you want it to be for something else."

Cole said nothing, but his fingers slid around to hers, and laced them tightly in his.

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All night, she lay in his arms. He hadn't meant to hold onto her hand for as long as he did, but by the time he let go, her fingers had gone completely loose. He turned towards her, her face inches from his on the pillow, and saw she'd drifted off. He pulled up the furs around her, dimmed the stone further, and was just about to turn away when she snuggled closer towards him, wrapping her arm around his back.

For warmth. For warmth, for warmth. Only for warmth.

He slid his arm under the cover and pulled her close to him. Any faint remnant of cold melted away.

He'd shared a bed with a woman many a time before now, but not like this. Never had he watched his companions sleeping. Never had he had the urge to sweep back their hair. He wanted to tug Eirwen into him, to fold her body against his until not a fraction of space remained between them. This wasn't merely attraction. This was something else. He could not hold her tightly enough. Small as her body was, he felt his was the tiny, malleable one, turned to putty by her proximity.

It was liquifying. Horrifying. Irresistible. A part of him groaned with the impossible nearness of her, frustrated by all space between them, but another, deeper part was afraid of the morning, when this would be over.

He did not want her gone from his side.

∞∞∞

Eirwen woke several times in the night, tucked under Cole's chin, nestled against his chest. She had shared beds before, most often with Juniper or Ivy in recent years. This… this was something different. For a start, Cole was so *big* in comparison to them, and they never held her like this, if at all. The closest she could attribute it to was being a small child in her father's arms, a feeling of safety so long ago for her, it was almost forgotten.

But it was nothing like that, nothing at all.

She was conscious of a hundred different things, of his breath against her temple, his hand in her hair, the slow flickering of his closed lids and the flair of his dark lashes. She reached up tentatively, her fingers caressing the slope of his cheekbones and his slightly-parted lips, as if they were the door to something she didn't dare open.

She jerked her hand away, wondering if she should roll out of his reach, even when every fibre of her skin ached to close the gap further, pulled by a thousand different threads.

She admired his crisp profile, the soft, quiet surge of his lungs, the steady thump of his heart under her head. His warmth seeped through her, and she wanted to crawl into him further, in a way she couldn't quite explain. Her thoughts and feelings stuttered inside her, swirling like mudded water.

Give me words, she prayed. *Help me shape this mess into meaning. And in the meantime… find a way to keep him here with me. Don't let either of us be alone any more.*

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A stark coldness woke her. Cole was not in bed. She tumbled out of the makeshift tent, heart pounding, imagining multiple scenarios of death and horror and scrambling for her sword.

Something thudded to the floor behind her. An apple.

She picked it up, her breath slowing. Cole was unlikely to have left an apple behind if he prised himself away to check a suspicious sound, or had somehow been dragged away unwillingly.

He was unlikely to have left an apple for her if he'd left because he felt strange about what happened yesterday… or what didn't happen.

She pulled on her boots and went into the next room. Cole had broken one of the old crates and used it to start a fire.

"Morning!" he said. "The sun's up, so I thought we'd be safe to start a fire… tempting as it was to stay nestled up with you all day."

Eirwen glanced down. "Did you leave me an apple?"

"I found it in my pack. Garnet must have snuck it in."

Eirwen smiled. It sounded like her.

"Did… did you leave apples on my pillow after my father's death?"

Cole blinked at her. "Yes," he said slowly.

"Why?"

"Well, you always found apples irresistible–"

"I meant, why didn't you say anything?"

"It wasn't a secret. I thought you knew."

"I thought they were from the servants. Why… why did you do that?"

"Because you were wasting away to nothing and I felt absolutely awful."

"About what? You didn't cause the accident."

He shook his head. “No,” he said, “but, at the time, I wondered if… if I could have done something differently. I blamed myself for quite a long time. For that, and… for the way I treated you before.”

Eirwen sat down beside him, and laid her head against his shoulder. “I hate your hidden depths,” she whispered, smiling.

Cole grinned. “No, you don’t.”

“Fine, I hate your confidence.”

“Hmm, no, I’m fairly sure you like that too.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Yes,” he said, moving closer, “but I think you enjoy that most of all.”

He tilted his face towards her. There was barely a fraction of space between them. Their cool breath mingled in the frozen air. She wanted to pull on that teasing, perpetual smirk of his, but as his gaze dropped, so did the smirk, as if melted by the giddy heat of her closeness. A moment trembled in the air, and Eirwen flushed with the same sensation that had gripped her last night, a desire to sink into his flesh, to abandon her own entirely.

A desire.

A desire for Cole.

She pulled backwards, only a sliver, and bit into her apple, grinning at him. “This is a good apple,” she chuckled. “Thank you for giving it up.”

Cole seized her hand and sunk his teeth into the flesh of fruit, licking his lips. “Who said we couldn’t share?” He swallowed his mouthful. “Irresistible.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Is it working?”

Eirwen took back her apple, and the hand attached to it. “Tempting as it is to stay sitting by the fire all day, we should probably make a move after we’ve eaten.”

Cole snatched another bite. “If you say so. Where to?”

“I… I want to keep going after Onyx.”

“Are you sure? With your leg?”

Eirwen rubbed her thigh. “I’ve got enough ointment to dull the pain. I can walk fine. I think we can get most of the way to where Merry thinks he’s heading using this cavern– low-risk with the daylight. It’s a long journey back with the tunnel blocked up either way.”

Cole nodded. “All right. Do we have any bread left? We can toast it now.”

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After a meagre breakfast of toast and the remaining slices of apple, they re-equipped themselves, wrapped what fur they could around their shoulders, and set off into the cavern. The snow had fallen thick and heavy during the night, and they swiftly decided to go an indirect route down the backgrounds that was less in the path of the snowfall.

The light made the snow glisten with a bluish hue. Cole could not believe he had ever hated it. Yes, there were times he missed the bustle of Florin, the bright, terracotta cities and the glimmering seas, but how could he have ever thought this land was ugly, this shimmering, icy world?

He would have to return to Florin one day, but he knew he would miss Aberthor.

Eirwen struggled behind him, her leg causing her more trouble than she cared to admit. He held

out his hand to help her when the terrain became too rough, but she usually rebuffed him.

"Is it… me you have a problem with?" he asked after the dozenth time. "Or help in general?"

Eirwen blinked at him. "I don't like relying on people."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes me feel… less strong."

"You know, I came down here the first time alone because I didn't trust anyone not to report back to my mother and I didn't know about the dangers. You did. Why did you come alone?"

"I'm faster alone," she said. "I can usually outrun any danger."

"Can't argue there," he said. "But *usually*?"

"There have been some… close calls."

Cole shook his head. "If I had support like yours, I'd lean on it all the time."

"I don't want to put them in danger."

"It's not selfish if they want to help you." He held out his hand again. "*I* want to help you. And I can't exactly get hurt helping you over a rock."

Eirwen sighed, seizing his arm. "Fine."

They stumbled onwards for a few more hours, Eirwen growing slower and more unsteady. She would almost certainly snap at him if he suggested a break, but they'd need to stop soon to pick at the handful of seeds they still had. At least water here wasn't an issue, although the cavern didn't stretch on much further. Soon they would be plunged into darkness once more.

Steam rose ahead of them, and Cole caught a scent of something unknown and familiar at the same time, almost like mint.

"What is that?" he sniffed.

"An underground hot spring," Eirwen said matter-of-factly. "The minerals have a vaguely healing property; it smells slightly herbal, for some reason."

"Healing?" He looked at her.

"No," she said. "We're not stopping to take a *bath*."

"Why not? We could do with a rest, and if it helps you–"

"I'm *fine*."

"Of course you are." He sighed, and clutched his shoulder. "Oh, ow! The pain! Woe is me!"

"What are you doing?"

"Exaggerating with humorous intent whilst playing on your innate kindness in an attempt to guilt you into resting in a hot spring. Is it working?"

"Not at all."

"Come on, Snow. It'll be good for us. And fun. Remember last night? You want me to be happy, right?"

"We can't stop here. It's indefensible. If shades attack–"

"We're still in the path of daylight. We'll be fine."

Eirwen growled. She probably didn't mean for the noise to be as delightful as it sounded. Cole did his best not to smile.

"If we die because we stopped to take a rest *in a hot spring* I'm going to be so annoyed with you," she hissed.

"If I get to see you naked, it will be totally worth it."

"There are easier ways to see me naked."

"Oh really?" Cole arched an eyebrow. "Would you care to share them?"

She glared. "You turn your back whilst I change. And don't swim too close."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Fine," she said, marching on ahead of him. "I better not regret this!"

∞∞∞∞

She slipped down into the underground cavern and was immediately hit with a blissful wall of steam. Several deep pools of water glimmered behind it. Crystals were set into the rocky sides, making everything glisten with a golden hue.

She did a quick check to ensure there were no other entrances, and started to undress, dropping her layers onto a bench cut out of the stone.

Sliding into the water was divine, like wrapping herself in liquid sunlight. She let out a slight moan as it washed over her leg, and swam forward, deeper into the pool.

"I take it you're in now?" said Cole from above.

"I'm in," she said.

"I'll head down. No peeking, Princess!"

She groaned. "I'll try to contain myself."

She fixed her gaze on the wall ahead, and the gleaming, dappled light on the surface of the water, and tried not to think about him shuffling off his clothes behind her.

"All right, I'm in."

Eirwen pivoted round. Cole was standing waist high in the water, his sculpted chest slick in the steam. She'd barely noticed before when she was doctoring his shoulder how perfect the panes of his stomach were, a fact of which he was evidently aware.

"You– that is *not* 'in'!"

"I'm covered! I can't help being so tall–"

"Sit down!"

"Why?"

"You know perfectly well, why!"

"And spoil this view for you?"

"I swear to the gods, Cole, I will drown you."

Cole sighed, sliding under the water, the golden liquid sloshing against his shoulder blades. He swam forward in a couple of easy breaststrokes, drifting past her.

"Traditionally, women swoon at the sight of my bare chest. You wound me."

"I really will in a minute."

He turned his back to her, the skin still marbled with black and blue. She almost reached out to touch it. Maybe he did need this, after all, but he hadn't once truly complained.

"Shall we play a game?" he said, staring up at the ceiling.

"Will I like it?"

"Possibly," he said. "How about we trade questions? The only rule is we answer honestly, or not all. But we can't ask a question of our own until we've answered one."

"That sounds simple enough," Eirwen said, still searching the words for some kind of trap.

"Fantastic," he said, swimming a wide circle around her. "I'll go first. Name one thing you love about the capital."

"The view from the palace," she said swiftly.

Cole smiled. "Me too."

"All right. What's one thing you miss about Florin?"

"The sea," he said, just as quickly.

"I've never seen the sea."

"No? Perhaps I should take you, after all this is over." He smiled. "Maybe that's my next question."

"What is?"

"Would you like me to take you to the sea one day?"

Eirwen looked down. "Yes," she said quietly. "I think I would. Is that the answer you wanted?"

"Of course it was. Was that your question?"

"Sure."

"All right. Next one. Do you… do you genuinely find me irritating? Because if you do… I can probably stop teasing you. I certainly *should,* if you really don't like it. But I rather hope that it's all just… playful, you know? That you don't really mind me being here with you."

Eirwen paused.

His face swam close to her. She could make out each tiny bead of liquid against his skin, each droplet on his lashes. His dark eyes widened, like pools of molten liquid. The light picked out each fleck of amber in them, making them glisten. Her gaze drifted down to his mouth, parted slightly in the heat. They reminded her of peaches, although it had been years since she'd tasted fruit so succulent.

What was she doing? Why was she looking at him this way?

"I… I don't *really* mind," she said, already wishing she'd just passed this question.

"Did I make you uncomfortable earlier stepping into the water?"

"That's two questions."

"You're right," he said. "Ask yours, then."

"Why do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"The teasing."

"I guess I just want to see your reaction. Maybe I'm desperate for your attention."

"You said yourself that many a woman has swooned for you. Why not do it to them?"

She expected him to say *they're not here.* She didn't want him to, but she was sure that would be his excuse.

"Because they're not you," he said. "And that's two you've asked."

Eirwen blushed. "You don't make me uncomfortable," she said, "not… not exactly. I just… I don't know what to do."

"With what?"

"Um… feeling… feeling things…"

"Feeling things?" Cole stopped swimming, drawing up to her. She could feel his hands hovering beside her in the water, not daring to touch, but the water rippled between his fingers and the bare skin of her waist, surging against her. "What sort of things?"

"I… I can't answer that one." *I don't know.*

Cole's glimmering face, bathed in golden light, crept ever closer. She wished for words, but what ones, she couldn't fathom. She wished for time, to strike it still, to paint it to a close and capture forever the unstained intimacy of the moment unfurling between them.

She moved towards him, placing her hands against his chest, against the tear she mended in his shoulder.

Cole exhaled at the weight of her feathery touch, half shaking as he slid his large hands around

her face, cupping her cheeks and thumbing away a loose strand of hair. “I’d like to kiss you now,” he said. “I really, *really* want to kiss you. More than I ever think I’ve ever wanted to kiss anyone.”

Her flesh trembled. “Do it, then,” she said.

She did not expect him to. She wanted him to, wanted him to dissolve that gap more than she’d ever wanted anything, but she was sure his nerve would fizzle away at the last moment, like hers was sure to.

It didn’t.

Their mouths crushed together and Eirwen’s entire body went up like a match, her giddy heart exploding in her chest. Cole’s lips explored hers with expert attention, and she pressed back with all the force she dared, her fingers tight against the skin of his shoulders and aching to move down to examine the rest of him.

Cole jerked back suddenly, his dark eyes shining above her, wide and luminous. “Wait,” he said trepidatiously, “was that your first kiss?”

Eirwen’s cheeks burned. This was what she was afraid of, her inexperience, her weaknesses exposed and raw to the world. “Um… yes. Not… not many prospective partners in the woods, you know. Was it… was it obvious?”

“No,” said Cole, “I’m just a bit surprised you wasted it on me.”

“I wouldn’t say *wasted*–”

Cole let out a quiet groan, and kissed her again. She folded into him, her hands pooling into his thick, jet black hair, like damp silk.

“You are… very good…” she murmured, as his lips dipped to her neck.

He grinned wildly against her throat. “I would hope so,” he said. “But tell me if you’d like to stop.”

I will never tell you that.

She grabbed his face and forced him back against her lips, tracing the shape of his mouth with hers. His hands drifted to the base of her back, pulling her against the hard panels of his chest. His kiss burnt against her, filling her with liquid heat. She was sunstone, lighting up the cold cavern of her former self, radiant with desire.

This was new and terrifying and wonderful. He could kiss her into utter oblivion.

Something throbbed against her middle, and she was suddenly, painfully aware of how naked they both were.

She pushed away from him. “You can’t sleep with me,” she spluttered.

Cole laughed. “I wasn’t planning on it. I don’t have any of the proper precautions. I can’t sleep with you even if you beg.” His eyes glinted, but then the mischief in his gaze settled. “If that was… your primary concern?”

“It’s… It’s a bit... *much.*”

Cole smiled softly, grazing her arm. It was a look she wasn’t used to him wearing, devoid of all his wickedness. “Do you want to stop?”

“Um, no, not particularly, if you’re sure you’re all right to just keep to kissing…”

“Of course I am,” he said, stepping closer again. “Your kisses are highly satisfactory.”

“Oh, um, good.” She slipped her arms around his neck.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Tell me when to stop,” he whispered.

“Not yet,” she uttered back. “Not yet…”

Chapter Seventeen:

King of the Shadows

Cole had been missing for over a day, and no one knew where he was. The initial assumption was that he was in the company of a woman. Bianca had learned the hard way that using the Mirror to spy on her son was rarely a good idea, but he had never, ever been gone this long. She was growing frantic.

He would not do this to her without good reason. Something had happened to him.

She marched back into chambers and threw open the curtain around the mirror.

"Show me my son," she demanded.

The Mirror's face appeared briefly, and then twisted into smoke. No, not smoke, steam. Cole was in some kind of bath house, although she'd never seen one lit so luminously before.

He *was* tangled in the arms of a woman. Awkward as the image was, the knot of fear in her stomach started to unwind… until the steam dispersed.

"No," she breathed, "it's not possible."

Her son was with Eirwen, was *kissing* Eirwen.

"Mirror!" she snapped. "This… this cannot be!"

"I assure you, my queen, this is as you see."

"Then– then he's under a spell! That wretch has cursed him somehow–"

The Mirror whirled, checking this for her. "The prince is under no spell. At least, none of magical origin."

"What do you mean?"

"She could always have seduced him the old fashioned way."

Bianca's chest heaved. Of course. Of course that was it. She had powers like that of her own, the power to make men do whatever she wanted. There was no way Cole would willingly betray her. He'd been tricked, hoodwinked, manipulated. He would not be the first man to fall for a woman's charm. There was no way he knew what he was doing.

"My Queen?" the Mirror prompted. "What do you wish to do?"

Bianca thought for a moment. Clearly, the attempt with the cursed armour hadn't worked. She needed something absolute, something there would be no escape from. "Give me something that will utterly destroy her," she said.

There was a flash of a smile. "As you wish, My Queen."

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Eirwen had no idea how long they floated for, kissing and touching until her body felt numb. She had no idea why they stopped, or why she could still feel traces of him all over her even after she'd redressed. Her whole body was blushing. She could barely look him in the eyes as they resumed their journey.

"Snow," started Cole.

"Um, yes?"

He ran a hand through his hair, looking curiously nervous. "I… I don't know if I crossed a line

and you're regretting it, but… I don't. I'm sorry if you do, but kissing you… it wasn't a mistake. Not for me."

"It… it wasn't a mistake for me, either."

"Oh, good," he said, his shoulders dropping. "Was it… was it a… a one time thing? What happens in the Dwarven Underground, stays in the Dwarven Underground sort of thing?"

Eirwen looked down. "I'm… I'm not sure."

"Right," he said. "I… I would be open to more experimentation in future, if… if you wanted to become more sure, one way or another."

Eirwen grinned. "I'll bear that in mind."

She half-wanted to take his hand, but the action seemed too strange, too abnormal, too different from everything she knew. She had never held hands with a person like that. Then again, she had never kissed a person like that, either. She'd never kissed anyone at all…

They'd missed a few steps. Her first kiss shouldn't have happened in such a state of undress, and to happen with Cole…

Was it him that was the problem, or her? Or was in the intensity of the situation, of everything wound up and unwound in an instant, of her first kiss being fire and water rather than soft and simple?

She shoved it aside. They had a job to do.

∞∞∞∞

Cole's eyes lingered on Eirwen's form in a way they never had before as they carried on deeper into the mountains. Her leg didn't seem to be bothering her as much any more, and she took the lead with relative ease. He preferred it this way; she knew better where they were going, and he liked being able to keep an eye on her.

Watch her back, Garnet had said. He hadn't thought she meant it so literally, but he spotted several silvery scars across her beautiful skin whilst she bathed. Her back was too often unguarded.

I will guard your back for as long as I am able, he thought, watching her climb over debris. *Until you tell me to go.*

He still wasn't sure what to make of what happened between them. Her body was unguarded, but her thoughts were anything but. She was as closed as an oyster. She was clearly attracted to him – that much was painfully obvious– but he didn't know if it was more than that.

He *wanted* it to be more than that.

He tried not to fixate on the memory of her body pressed against his, how small and fragile and strong she seemed, how all her strength and all her vulnerability quivered in his arms. More than that, he tried not to think about how she told him she hadn't wasted her first kiss on him, that she'd given him a fragment of a suggestion that she wanted him too.

She was the one who curled up to him last night, but she had done that for him, and it was difficult to tell if that was because she truly cared or because that was just the sort of person she was. She *said* she cared about him, but then she had many in her life she cared for.

He didn't. He'd lost Niamh. He was going to lose his mother, one way or another. Everyone he'd ever cared about was slipping away from him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, turning back to face him.

"Hmm?"

"Your silence is loud."

How could she be so good at picking up on others' feelings and so bitterly inadequate when it came to understanding her own? A faint urge to snap at her bubbled up, but he quenched it. It wasn't fair.

"My usual worries," he replied. "Also, incredibly hungry."

"There's another town up ahead."

They raided it for supplies. There was nothing edible left to be eaten, so they poured themselves a tankard of ale and Eirwen fished in one of the underground rivers. They were small, bitter things, but they kept the hunger at bay a little longer. It was far from a pleasant meal. They had long since passed out of daylight, and Eirwen shuddered every time a rat scuttled in the blackness, certain it was a shade. They stamped out the fire as soon as the fish were cooked and wolfed down their meagre meal, carrying on into the dark.

They passed a tunnel daubed with markings, colourful depictions of festivals, coronations, a dwarven wedding. Words and initials bordered a section of it, some long since faded away, some still sharp.

All hail Aveline!

Lance and Lorenzo were here

Bob and Aerisha forever

R + T

Ariel loves Freed (which had a sharp line slashed through it and the addendum '*no she doesn't'* scribbled underneath it.)

Cole couldn't help but smile at the thought of all these lovers passing through this place, of the tiny piece of them they'd left behind.

They passed into a round chamber, scratched with similar depictions. Some were etched with writing, a tongue Cole was unfamiliar with. He pointed to a section which showed a white creature in robes of gold light.

"I don't suppose you can read any of this, can you?"

Eirwen shrugged. "Bits."

"Who's this chap?"

Eirwen glanced towards the writing. "Janus, I think," she said. "An old god. 'The One with Many Faces.'"

"Do you believe in the old gods?"

Eirwen shrugged. "I'm not sure they were gods. Niamh said they were fairies that got too big for their boots. Onyx said they were more like demons. I think whatever they were, we're better off without them."

The panel next to Janus showed him eating what looked like a heart. In the following segment, a city was on fire. Faces screamed from the flames. Cole shuddered, silently agreeing with her.

She paused beside another image, one of a man eating a fruit and collapsing as though dead, only to be awakened by a kiss from a lover. Her mouth twitched slightly, and he wondered if she was thinking of what transpired between them. She studied the writing for some time.

"Snow?"

"Yes?"

"What do you think happened to this place?"

"What?"

"There must be a dozen underground towns like this one. There's all sorts of rumours as to what happened to the great dwarven empire, but I've never known what to believe. What do you

think?"

Eirwen shook her head. "I don't know. Onyx never told me."

"You think he knows?"

"I think he was there."

"What?" Cole stilled. "But that was… how long *do* dwarves live for?"

"A few centuries," Eirwen said. "How do you not know that?"

"We didn't really have dwarves in Florin. I kind of assumed the rumours about their longevity were just, you know. Rumours."

Eirwen sighed. "I think they can live for around six hundred years, and Onyx is *old*. Much older than his brother."

"But why wouldn't he tell you?"

"Well, exactly," she said. "That's why I've never pushed it."

They carried on through the endless corridors until light faded into oblivion. Eirwen took out her sunstone, faintly illuminating the passages until pinpricks of light drifted into view once again.

Eventually, they came to the end of a long hall. Two broken doors led to a throne room, grander than any of the others Eirwen had ever seen. The ceilings were enormous, the murals still intact, and the marble was stained with blood, black and brown and very, very old.

At the end of the room on a raised platform, a giant throne was split in two, and by the foot of that throne sat a hunched figure, piecing together a thousand shards of glass into a frame.

"Onyx?"

The dwarf turned to face them, but quickly turned away. "It figures you'd come. I'm surprised my brother isn't with you."

"We got separated."

Onyx sighed. "He really should have known better."

"Onyx… what are you doing down here?" Eirwen crept closer. Onyx's mirror was almost complete.

A tired breath shifted from him. "It's not a short tale. Nor one I ever hoped to tell. But I suppose… I suppose there's no hiding it any more." He swallowed. "A thousand years ago, there lived a… creature. One of the old ones. A being of immense power. Too much power. He called himself a god. He waged a war against his fellows, and was eventually subdued. But there was not enough human in him to die. He could not be killed. So they took him and imprisoned him inside a mirror, and locked that mirror deep in the dwarven underground.

"A few centuries later, it was found by an ambitious prince, a great general by the name of Jasper. The Mirror whispered things in his ear, told him of the great things he could achieve if only he were king instead of his brother. The whisperings grew too great, and Jasper eventually had his brother secretly murdered, and took the crown for himself. For decades, he ruled happily. And, by all accounts, well. But then he started to change. He wanted more. He was afraid. His brother had left two sons, one of which had reached maturity long ago. What if he decided *he* wanted the throne now?

"The darkness in Jasper grew. The Mirror convinced Jasper to seek out a shadow monster, a dark creature hidden deep underground. He told him absolute power would be his. Dwarves, as you know, are immune to almost all magic, but this twisted creature was something so old it was different. The minute Jasper unleashed it, he *became* it, a monster capable of infecting all others of its kind. He slaughtered his entire household, from the servants to his warrior-daughters that raced out to face him, and infected their corpses with his black blood and turned them into his minions."

"Shades," Eirwen swallowed. "He created the first shades."

Onyx nodded. “And every one that came after.”

“But… not you?”

Onyx shook his head. “Merry and I alone escaped the carnage of that day, although not unscathed.” He twitched his leg. “Merry was still a child by our standards. He remembers very little of our lives down here. He does not remember being a prince.”

Eirwen jolted. “Then Jasper–”

“Was our uncle, yes. It was our father he killed. And our mother.”

“Why… why didn’t you tell us any of this?”

“Garnet knows,” he said. “Or knows enough. Oakley knows a fair bit too, or suspects from the snippets Merry has told him.”

“Why not just tell us all?”

“Jasper is my great shame,” Onyx said. “I could not defeat him. I tried to lead my people –what was left of them– back to our home at one point, but he just crushed our forces and took our numbers as his own. I could not save them. This ruin is mine. A monument to my shame.”

Eirwen looked down. Cole could see her mind struggling, unable to shape her thoughts into words.

“What… what happened to the Mirror?” he asked in her stead.

“I smashed it, foolishly thinking that would prevent it from ever leading another soul astray again, but…” He shifted aside. A large piece of it was missing. “Janus *is* the Mirror,” he said. “Someone took a tiny sliver of it away, and it grew into another, was reframed, passed from hand to hand–”

“And ended up in Florin’s royal palace.” Cole clenched his fists. Eirwen reached out to touch his arm, but he could barely feel her. “Then Janus–”

“Found another ear to whisper in, by the sounds of things.”

Cole’s jaw tightened. “Do you think my mother… is she responsible for everything she’s done? Or was it him all along–”

Onyx shook his head. “I cannot say. I don’t know if Jasper’s ambitions were there before he met the Mirror, or afterwards. I do not know when he became Janus’ puppet. It was impossible to tell.”

Cole was silent. It *was* impossible. The necklace proved she wasn’t under a curse. Her ruthlessness was still just human, like anyone else’s.

Something shifted not far off, like a boulder rolling away from a wall.

Onyx flinched.

“Shades?” whispered Eirwen, drawing her sword.

Onyx shook his head. “Too big. Follow me.”

They crept behind the upturned tables, keeping low. Something emerged from a tunnel at the far end of the room. Cole chanced a look in its direction.

His breath stilled in his throat, his knees giving way underneath him.

It was a monstrous, sloping, shapeless creature, a dwarf made giant. Its skin oozed black oil, which trailed behind him like a vile cape. Its features were twisted and distorted beyond all recognition, melted into a faint mask of humanity. It groaned as it sludged forwards, its breathing loud and shallow.

Onyx kicked Cole’s leg and shot him a look. *Move.*

That was easy for Onyx to say. He didn’t have to crawl to stay out of sight. Cole choked his fears and pushed after him. The dwarf moved towards the wall and opened a concealed panel in the side. Halfway across, Cole’s foot caught on an upturned chair. It toppled over at the slightest

pressure, the sound racketing around the chamber.

The breathing stopped. A cold shadow cut across Cole's back.

"Run!" hissed Onyx.

A bench flew through the air and exploded into the wall overhead. Cole dived out of its path, rolling away from Eirwen and Onyx. Darted behind a pillar, a table slamming into it. Eirwen screamed.

A giant hand lunged for him, but before he could draw his sword, there was a flash of silver. Eirwen stood between them, hacking away at the massive limb.

The monster barely seemed to acknowledge her. It raised its second fist and smashed at Cole. He leapt out of the way just in time.

"Eirwen!"

She slid under the arm, cutting in huge circles, each swipe to no avail.

Onyx struck the back of the creature with his axe, pinning it to the ground. The black mass tore as it struggled against the weight.

"Come!" Onyx bellowed.

Eirwen snatched Cole's hand and dragged him to his feet, shoving him ahead of her as Onyx held open a rocky panel in the side of the room. Cole skidded inside, pulling Eirwen after him with such force that they wound up on top of each other as the door slammed shut.

The force of the monster slamming against the stone shuddered through the mountain. The ceiling cracked, showering them with rock. Cole covered Eirwen, sheltering her from debris, her arms wrapped around his head.

"You all right?" they both said at the same time, their faces inches apart.

Onyx coughed. "We need to move."

"What… what was *that?*" Cole hissed.

"Jasper," Onyx said, "or the thing that killed him. I've never been sure. And come on, he can still break that down. He can't get into the tunnel, but–"

Rock splintered from the ceiling.

"Right, of course," said Cole, dropping his hands away from Eirwen and straightening up. "After you."

They followed Onyx down the winding passage, Cole bent over, his head scraping along the roof of the tunnel. It was dark, lit only by a few tiny crystals in the walls. Cole wanted to take Eirwen's hand, but he was afraid of Onyx's reaction, and hers. She was unlikely to embarrass him by jerking away from his touch, but that didn't mean she would enjoy it.

He wished she'd reach for him instead.

Gods, what a fool I'm becoming, he thought. A silly school boy. A child at play. But then, he had no memory of something like this. He had never wanted to take a girl's hand before. That's not to say he hadn't enjoyed it when he had, but this strange yearning was utterly new to him.

They fumbled onwards, deeper into the dark, eventually emerging in the corridor of what must still have been the palace. Old bedrooms and great washrooms lined the hallway. Onyx hesitated outside one for a fraction of a second. Did it used to be his? Or someone else he knew?

They slipped down a set of steps, down another passageway or three, and wound up somewhere near the kitchens.

Something scuttled in the distance, overturning a pot with a loud clang.

Onyx stalled, holding his hand up to the two of them. They drew their swords, hugging the walls, creeping forward at the pace of a snail.

There was a low hiss. A whisper? Did shades whisper?

Onyx turned, his axe raised. A bolt soared over his shoulder.

"Dammit, Onyx!" bellowed a voice, "I nearly shot you!"

Merry barrelled forward and almost knocked his brother over with the force of his embrace.

"There's no need for that!" said the old dwarf, although his voice was softer than his words. He patted Merry's back.

Wren yanked Eirwen into her arms. "Almost worried us, there."

"I'm all right," Eirwen assured her.

"Good. You, boy?"

Cole was surprised to be addressed at all. "Oh, yes, thank you, ma'am."

She thumped his back. He tried not to wince.

Wren turned her attention back to Onyx. "You idiot," she growled, "why did you come here alone?"

"I'm less of a target by myself. Didn't want you to get hurt following my hunch."

"Oh," said Cole suddenly, "I get it now."

Five pairs of eyes turned sharply towards him.

"Sorry, working on my own thing, ignore me." *Like father, like daughter...*

"Happily," Onyx snapped.

"Why did you come here *at all,* is what I want to know," Wren continued. "I think you owe us that, after all this time."

Onyx sighed. "It's dangerous here," he said. "Too many exits. Let's find somewhere safer and make camp. We're not getting out of here tonight."

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An hour or so later, the party had taken refuge in a chamber within the palace, the two entrances tightly blocked. Wren had caught something –a giant, rat-like creature– which was roasting on the fireplace. Oakley was basting it with ale.

Onyx sat them down, and told them about Jasper, and Janus, and the mirror. What it meant for them all. Merry was silent the entire time, his hand in Oakley's. How much had he known before now?

"So," said Wren, when the story was over, "the Queen is in possession of an evil, all-seeing mirror that somehow has control over the shades, and the shades themselves are controlled by a thing that used to be your uncle?"

"That's about it, yes."

"Hmm. It's times like this I'm glad I don't have a family."

Eirwen coughed.

"Apart from you lot, obviously."

The Huntsman looked down, and Cole imagined he was wondering if she was including him amongst that number.

Wren looked back at Onyx. "So what's the plan?"

"If we're to defeat the Queen, we need to take out the shades first."

"Oh, gee, why didn't we think about that before?"

Onyx glared at her. He leant down into his satchel and removed a large, leather-bound tome. He

dropped it on the floor with a thud. "I've been doing some reading down here. I think I've found a way to defeat them."

"Pray tell."

"The shades perish in the light. We've known this for some time. But we've never been able to lure them outside of the mountain."

"And…?"

"Over the past few decades, I've noticed that they never inhabit the caverns with the active sunstones. Only the dead or dying ones."

"So? I doubt we'll be able to lure them there, either."

"We don't have to. We just need to resurrect one of these ones."

Merry frowned. "Can we do that?"

Onyx nodded. "It occurred to me that I never remembered any of the sunstones needing to be replaced during my lifetime down here. There must have been some way of re-energising them I wasn't familiar with. According to that book, the stones can be powered with the 'blood of a king'."

"Right," said Wren. "Do we know any?"

"Well," Onyx stroked his beard, "I'm hoping that mine might work. Technically I *was* first in line."

"I don't know, brother," said Merry. "This is all very magical. Dwarves aren't really–"

"Sunstones are, though, right?" interrupted Cole. "It's the stone that's magical, not you. In the same way that you can still make potions, right? Or wield certain magical items when the effect is on the item, not you?"

A wry smile snaked out of Onyx's lips. "You've been learning."

Cole scratched the back of his neck, and tried not to glance in Eirwen's direction. Was she pleased, too?

Merry paused for a moment. "Does it require any kind of ceremony?"

"None that I can decipher," Onyx said, shaking his head. "The blood touching the stone should be enough. The difficulty lies in *reaching* the stone. The steps have come away in places… possibly not accidentally, if there's any of Jasper left in that *thing*."

"And luring the majority of the shades into the cavern?" added Eirwen.

Onyx nodded. "It cannot be done safely."

"We could come back with an army?" Cole suggested. "We could contact Hammersmith, or Marie, see if they could send us any more men–"

Onyx shook his head, a gravelly sigh grating in his throat. "No. More men, more risk. If… if we're willing, we should try and come up with something, just the seven of us, although maybe Eirwen–"

"Can speak for herself and isn't letting you do this alone, no matter how valuable an asset she might be for the country?" Eirwen said promptly.

A smile ghosted Onyx's lips. "Aye. That's about right."

"I'll go with you to the sunstone. That's the least dangerous part, right? You said the steps had come apart, but I'm a great jumper. If we can get a ladder or something–"

"We'll work something out."

Oakley looked up from the fireplace. "This thing is almost done. We should rest for tonight. Tomorrow morning we'll scout the area and start working on a plan."

"A plan for a plan." Wren clapped her hands together. "And it involves food and drink. Where's that barrel we rolled in earlier?"

Chapter Eighteen:

The Blood of a King

Eirwen was slumped beside him, not quite close enough for him to touch, but near enough that the warmth of her seemed to invade the space between them. She was pale, her expression glazed, as if her thoughts were drifting around her. She looked almost sick with exhaustion.

He opened his mouth to say something, but Merry started dividing out portions of the cave crawler.

Wren passed a leg to Cole. "Here," she said, grinning. "Chew slowly."

"Wait–" Eirwen started, as Cole sank his teeth into the meat.

His eyes started to water. He coughed, choking it down. "My, my, that's a… unusual flavour."

His face contorted with the force of trying not to gag. The dwarves roared with laughter, hooting into their meals.

Eirwen glared at them. "That was mean. You don't have to tease him! You weren't like that when I first tried cave crawler."

"Yeah, but you were a tiny child–"

"It's his first time!" She clapped him on the back. "Sorry," she said. "I should have warned you. Here, try the ribs. It's not quite as bad…"

"Thanks," he said, still coughing. "The dwarven palate is a little different from ours, eh?"

"A bit, sure." She pressed a tankard into his hands. "Take this, too."

He murmured another thank you as he knocked back the ale, sucking a bit of meat off the bone before the taste could really get to him. He glanced up at the Huntsman, who was doing something similar. He cast him a sympathetic look.

Eirwen fell backwards into the bed she'd made for herself.

"You all right?" asked Cole. "You look–"

"Tired…" Eirwen groaned, burying her face in her rolled-up cloak. "Are you all right?"

"Hmm?"

"Finding out about Janus and that your mother–"

"It's fine, Snow. Stop worrying about me."

"Never," she said softly, her hand stretching out towards him.

He wanted to reach out and grab that hand, grab all of her, pull her into his arms and bury his face in her shoulder. He wanted to curl up with her like he had last night. Perhaps if they lay down next to each other, they would gravitate towards one another during the night, when everyone else was asleep–

Onyx marched between them, throwing his bedroll down on the ground.

Cole sighed and turned away, but he thought Eirwen might have shook her head too, like she'd been thinking the same thing and was disappointed. He couldn't quite catch her gaze.

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They settled on a routine for the night watch and fell one by one into slumber. Onyx took the

first one, possibly to make sure Cole didn't crawl round him into Eirwen's bed. He could still see her, now that the dwarf was sitting on a crate to the side of the room, drawing on a pipe. She lay on her side, one hand outstretched, the other underneath her head. It seemed completely wrong that there was any space between them at all.

"Still awake, young giant?" Onyx asked.

"Er..." Cole wasn't sure he wanted to reply. It was too late now.

"Can't sleep?"

"Um…"

"I can see you looking at her, you know."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be honest. What are your intentions with my daughter? You have a reputation, you know."

"Yeah, it's not unwarranted either…" Cole scratched the back of his neck. "But... it's not like that with Snow. Eirwen. I don't... I don't have any intentions towards her, exactly, because I'm pretty sure she's not interested. Not… not like that." He added, thinking back to the hot springs and being really grateful that dwarves couldn't read minds.

"She tell you that?"

"No, but–"

"She likes you. She might not know it yet, but she does."

"Are you... sure?"

"I've been her father long enough to know that."

Cole smiled.

"Don't smile like that!" Onyx snapped.

"Sorry," said Cole. "If… if I was interested… and I'm not saying I am, but… I take it I wouldn't have your blessing?"

Onyx puffed harder on his pipe. "Doesn't matter if you do or don't. She's the only one you need to think about."

"She *is* the only one I think about," Cole said, without really thinking. "I mean, er… sure."

Onyx sighed. "I'll offer you a piece of advice: tell her how you feel. She'll pretend she doesn't know otherwise. It's her way. I don't know why."

Cole actually had a fairly good idea of *why,* and at least part of it had something to do with spending almost five years in the company of an emotionally-repressed dwarf that did the exact same thing. The other part… that came from losing Olwen, from finding it too hard to say how much you cared, when a person could be wrenched from you in a moment. To her credit, she'd never *stopped* caring though, never even stopping showing it. She was as warm as she'd ever been, but her heart was muted, anything deep in her expression unreadable.

Cole wasn't particularly good at speaking his feelings either, but he supposed he might need to be a bit braver in that regard. She was certainly worth being brave for.

He closed his eyes, and pretended to sleep. He tried not to think about her.

It didn't work.

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Eirwen woke early the next morning, the others having excused her from watch, and started a

fire, trying to not to glance too long at Cole. His arms were outstretched over Onyx's head, and she wondered if he'd fallen asleep reaching for her before the dwarf had slunk into the space between them.

Silly. Foolish. Don't think about that.

Her heart beat a little faster at the thought.

The rest of the party rose not longer after. They had a quick breakfast, freed themselves from the barricaded chamber, and headed out into the ruined city.

The path leading up to the palace was the best place to draw the shades into. It was open, directly under the path of the sunstone, and not far from the steps leading to the chamber above it. It's only downside was the lack of cover, with few buildings to take refuge in if the numbers became overwhelming.

"We'll rig some traps," said Merry. "Keep them at bay."

Onyx nodded. "We used to play here, you know. As boys."

Merry gasped. "You *played*?"

"A long time ago."

It was hard to imagine Onyx as a child, to imagine him as anything other than wrinkled and hunched. The stark difference between the brothers was ever more apparent now.

Merry looked around him, his gaze wistful. "I don't remember."

"Probably for the best, as you're about to blow it up."

"Maybe, but there are some memories I should like to have had."

Oakley put his arm on Merry's shoulder.

Eirwen knew what he meant. For all the pain of her father's death, she was glad, impossibly glad, that she had known him, and she would have braced that pain again for a chance to know her mother.

Cole and the Huntsman came out of a nearby house, holding a ladder between them. Wren dragged out planks behind them. They added the lumber to the pile they were collecting to fix the broken walkway up to the sunstone. Onyx took them to get started, while Eirwen helped Merry and Oakley lay some explosives.

"Do you really remember nothing about living down here?" she asked the younger dwarf.

He shook his head. "Bits and pieces. Snippets. Images is all."

"How old were you when–"

"Not much more than a toddler, although old enough to hold a toy sword, apparently!"

Eirwen thought it was strange to have forgotten something so important, the beginning chunk of your life. Then again, it was several centuries ago.

"Do you miss it?"

Merry glanced at her. "In a way, yes. I miss what could have been, what I don't recall… my parents' faces. The friends I lost. The life I could have lived." He sighed. "Silly, right? It's hardly like I'm miserable. It's actually all worked out for the best." He looked across at his husband, laying explosives at the foot of a building. His expression turned dreamy.

I wonder if anyone will ever look at me that way, thought Eirwen, and then her cheeks prickled. *I wonder if someone already does.*

Something clinked a few streets away. The three of them froze, laying down anything in their hands. They waited for another sound. Eirwen drew her sword.

Something heavy was being dragged across the stones. People were moving. Too heavy for shades, too much clinking. Armour?

They pressed themselves into the dark as a dozen knights turned the corner. Half of them carried a long, covered object between them, the size of a coffin. Merry and Oakley exchanged curious glances.

Don't look at us, Eirwen prayed. *Don't look in this direction.*

There were too many to fight, if a brawl broke out. The only move would be to flee–

One of them caught her eye.

"Halt!" he yelled. The guards tightened around the stolen treasure, drawing their swords. Merry moved for his pipe, but another guard twitched for his pistol.

"Stop," said Eirwen, lowering her sword, "we have no quarrel with you. Take your treasure and be gone."

There was a whispering amongst them. The captain stepped forward. "Princess," he nodded curtly.

Eirwen swallowed. She had been hoping no one would recognise her, that they would decide two dwarves and a young girl weren't any threat to them.

"If you know who I am," she said, trying a different tactic, "then the crown you answer to is mine by right. I order you to leave us be."

A few of the guards looked down at their feet, sharing awkward glances. They clearly did not wish to move against the princess.

"I cannot allow that, princess though you be," said the captain. "I must take you back to Her Majesty."

"You will do no such thing." Cole appeared behind them, striding to Eirwen's side.

"Prince Cole! What are you–"

"If you won't recognise her authority, recognise mine. *I* order you to leave this place. Report back to my mother if you must, but harm the princess at your own peril." He drew his sword. One guard shuddered.

"Your Highness, you can't be serious."

"On the contrary, Captain Blackwell, I have never been more serious. If you wish to take Eirwen, you will have to go through me. I daresay my mother will not be pleased if any harm should come to me."

Something sounded in the distance. One of the knights backed into another. "What was that?" he hissed.

"Something you'd rather not face," said Cole. "I repeat, gentleman. Depart this place at once."

The scuttling drew nearer. Shapes darted in the corner of Eirwen's vision. They needed to move, quickly.

Another knight gave a shriek, smacking into the object and sending it crashing to the ground with a terrific noise that reverberated throughout the chamber. The scuttling intensified, and worse, a deep, hollow rumbling groaned through the stone.

The shades were on them in an instant, ten, twenty, thirty crawling out of the shadows. Merry drew his spark stones and struck a nearby fuse, setting off an explosion in the corner of the street. It took out three, delaying the others and causing a distraction just long enough for Eirwen to bolt from her spot.

She streamed back towards Onyx, Wren and the Huntsman, Cole behind her.

They were forty feet up the side of the cavern, fixing the gaps in the steps.

"What happened?" asked the Huntsman.

"Knights, shades, dozens, maybe more. They're filling the square–"

"Merry? Oakley?" barked Onyx from above.

"Holding them off–"

Wren tumbled down the steps and leapt back onto the ground, drawing her crossbow and streaming towards the fray.

"Defend Onyx!" she snapped at Cole.

Cole nodded, taking back point as Eirwen flew up the stairs, over the planks replacing the missing steps and up to Onyx's position. He raced upwards, climbing towards the platform above the crystal.

Another explosion erupted below. Smoke clawed through the air. Stone struck the ground. Eirwen forced herself not to look, not to think of Merry and Oakley and Wren and the knights. She needed to get Onyx to the top.

He stopped shortly, causing her to almost topple over a wide ledge. It was almost ten feet across. Too wide for him to jump. Eirwen glanced backwards, trying to gauge the length of the ladders and planks they'd already used, only to find the bottom of the steps crawling with shades.

Cole yanked a plank away and kicked the other to the bottom of the cavern, hauling it up to Eirwen. It fell cleanly through the gap.

Onyx groaned, shooting Cole a look as though this were all his fault.

"How strong are you?" he barked.

"Pretty strong."

"Toss me."

"I'm sorry?"

"Toss me. Over the gap."

"Um–"

There was a noise from behind them. The shades were climbing over one another, forming some kind of grotesque, misshapen ladder with their own bodies.

"Quickly, lad!"

Cole seized him by his backpack, pulling him into a wide swing and throwing him over the ledge. He hit the other side with a thud, his legs dangling in mid-air. A half-scream wrenched from Eirwen's throat, and she took a running jump, leaping over the gap and pulling him up the other side, only looking back briefly to see if Cole was following.

They raced up the rest of the mountain side, into the chamber above the giant sunstone. A large hole was cut into the floor. Long, crystalline tendrils, the rocky roots of the stone, clung to the sides. Onyx streamed towards them, his dagger already outstretched. He crashed down on his knees, rolling up his sleeve, and slashed the inside of his arm. A long, shallow cut. Blood dripped onto the crystal.

Cole slammed the door shut behind them, but it was so old that the hinges fell clean away. Eirwen caught it before it could fall, kicking it backwards down the stairs and sending a flurry of shades spiralling to the ground.

She wheeled back to Onyx. The stone was glowing. Softly, faintly, like the embers of a fire.

Onyx was cursing under his breath, squeezing out his blood. It ran in dribbles.

"Onyx!"

"It's not enough," he hissed. "It needs more."

He picked up his dagger again, placing it to his flesh. He paused above his wrist.

"Eirwen," he started.

"What are you–"

His face tightened, the words shrivelling from his lips.

"No," she said. "No. No, I won't let you."

"It might not kill me, but if it–"

A triumphant crash from the door. Two shades broke through. Cole pushed back, delaying a third. Eirwen sprinted towards one, striking it under the ribs as it raised its axe, seizing the falling weapon from its hand and chucking it into the writhing mass of bodies congealing at the entrance.

The tendrils stopped glowing. Eirwen glanced behind her. A shade had Onyx pinned to the floor, his bloody arm far from the stone.

"On–"

A hand fastened around her ankle, yanking her to the ground. An ugly, twisted face rose over her. She snatched a dagger from her belt and drove it up through the soft, guarded flesh of its chin, straight through the roof of its mouth.

She rolled it over, twisting her blade clean, and stabbed its chest for good measure.

She climbed to her feet. Three were on Onyx now, and Cole had thrown himself at the others, slashing so wildly his blade looked more like silver light. A mass of hands and teeth rushed up to greet him.

She could not save them both. She'd be lucky to save herself. And the sun stone…

She could feel its feeble, humming heart, the faint remnant of life. It pattered through the stone, against the organ swelling in her chest.

"The blood of a king…" she whispered. She looked down at the giant crystal heart, and wiped her dagger clean. "Maybe you'll accept the blood of a princess instead," she said. "*Or the blood of a queen*."

Onyx let out a yell, a scream, a desperate cry–

She slashed her arm, long and deep. There was no time to wait.

Her blood splashed against the crystal, and light crashed through the chamber, hot and blinding. It struck the searing pain in her arm. She was conscious of someone screaming, followed by the sensation of dissolving, and then–

Nothing.

Chapter Nineteen:

A Pure Heart

Cole turned at the sound of Onyx's scream and saw Eirwen with the dagger raised to her arm. He knew in a second what she planned to do. He raced towards her, shrieking her name, but the chamber erupted into a wall of light. He was blown backwards as the light expanded, the shades letting out a shrill cry as the blast reached them. They vanished in seconds, blown away in wisps of dark smoke. The light screamed against his eardrums, striking the heart in his skin. A force like a waterfall crashed against him.

The entire time, he could only think of one thing.

Eirwen.

As suddenly as it began, it stopped. The light dimmed, the crushing sensation vanished. Feeling returned to his limbs.

He climbed steadily to his feet.

Eirwen, Eirwen, Eirwen.

She was lying a few feet away from the drop, her back towards him. Onyx had already reached her side by the time he did.

"Stupid, foolish girl… why did you have to–"

The dwarf moved to roll her over, but Cole yanked her into his arms, shaking her as roughly as he dared. "Eirwen!" *Wake up, wake up, wake up...*

She moved slightly under his touch, murmuring something.

Onyx slumped, muttering a prayer. "Eira."

She blinked and jerked upwards. "I'm… I'm all right," she said, sounding as surprised as Cole was relieved. He dropped his arms away from her, his breath thudding against his chest.

Eirwen gripped her arm. A thin, silvery scar was all that remained of the wound that could have killed her. Onyx seized it, pressing against the mark as if he expected it to reopen at any minute.

"You should be dead," he said sharply.

Eirwen stared at him, her eyes wide. "So why aren't I?"

"That's a very good question."

"Why did her blood make the light explode like that?" Cole asked. "Yours didn't."

"Another good question. There must be something about her blood, or…"

"My mother wanted to eat her heart," Cole said, remembering something. "At the time I thought it was just madness, but… what if Janus told her to do that? What if it could have done something like that for him?"

"A pure heart," said Onyx underneath his breath.

"What?"

"I read about it in the book. According to legend, it has the power to…"

"To what?" asked Eirwen.

"To resurrect a god."

Eirwen stilled. "But… but I'm… I'm just a human."

"It's old magic," said Onyx stiffly. "Like the opposite of what turned Jasper into that… that thing. Old magic applies to all creatures on this earth."

"But… what even is a 'pure' heart?" said Eirwen. "Because I've killed lots of things–"

Onyx shook his head. “That’s not it. It’s to do with real, genuine goodness. The kind that most cannot possess. Not in this world.”

Eirwen’s face was white. Noise spiralled up from outside. “We should go down to the others,” she said. “In case the knights start a fight again.”

Cole nodded. “Can you stand?”

“I feel fine.” She climbed to her feet. “You two?”

“Bruised, not broken,” Onyx reported. “Cole?”

The name sounded unfamiliar on Onyx’s gravelly tongue. “I, er, nothing serious,” he responded.

“Good.”

They found the others waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. The stone and marble had been obliterated, the rock resembling chewed-up mush. A dozen houses lay in ruins. Blood, black and red, stained the site. Two knights were nowhere to be seen, another was injured, but the dwarves were all still standing. Eirwen ran to them as Blackwall hastened towards Cole, dropping into a bow.

“Your Highness,” said the knight, “I am relieved to see you unharmed–”

“What’s the package?” he said. It was lying behind the remaining knights, still covered, their swords drawn around it.

Blackwell avoided his gaze. “I… I cannot say. But if you come back with us–”

Cole shook his head. “You have two choices. Leave now, or forsake my mother. Do not support her madness, Blackwell. It’s too dangerous.”

Blackwell exhaled, his jaw tight. “Going against her is too dangerous. She has… has powers. Knowledge that no one should–”

“That’s not a reason to help her!”

“I’m not helping her,” Blackwell said. “I’m helping myself.”

Cole’s eyes sharpened, but he didn’t press it. Had she threatened their families? Had the Mirror searched their souls for things to blackmail them with?

“You should come with us,” Blackwell tried again.

Cole shook his head. “No. My place is here. Beside her.”

Before he could glance at Eirwen to gauge her reaction, something shifted near the palace entrance. A couple of the guards who were still scouting the area yelled something, and everyone moved at once.

The creature that was once Jasper pooled out of the building, dripping down the steps. The sunlight did nothing to him, but his body moved slowly, its twisted limbs staggering.

“He’s still alive,” breathed Merry.

Onyx pulled out his pistol. “Not for much longer.”

He fired it into the mass. Black flesh, more like liquid, splattered the ground. He was not a shade, Cole realised. He was something else. But he was weaker than before, damaged by the sun or the loss of swathes of his followers, he didn’t know.

The knights fired too, bolts, arrows and bullets smacking the monstrous form. The creature roared. Unlike the other things, this felt pain.

Eirwen leapt from his side, her blade slashing across the limbs, darting backwards every time it swiped. He joined her, diving under its arms, its punches loose and slippery, as the others fired at its head far above them.

It crashed to its knees. Cole pinned an arm to the floor, skewering it with his sword. It jerked underneath him, the muscle refusing to settle, to give up.

He hated this part of a hunt, he always had. The thrill of the chase heated his blood, the joy of

victory he could revel in, but the moment something struggled in pain was when he wanted to look away.

Eirwen held her blade to its head, and hesitated.

Onyx reached her side, reloading his pistol. He held it to the monster's face.

"If there is any dwarf left within you, Uncle," he said, "for all your sins… be at peace now."

He fired the shot.

∞∞∞∞

The guards left shortly after, not saying farewell and taking the object with them before anyone could ask what it was. Uneasiness filled the space where relief should have been. It cluttered Cole's thoughts as he took a moment to sit down and review any injuries. Nothing broken, a few cuts on his exposed chin, some definite bruising. The only one of significance was a slash across his cheek. It was still bleeding. He filled a rag with whiskey and tried to clean it.

"Here," said Eirwen, dropping to his side, "let me."

"Thank you."

She dabbed the wound, her touch sending shivers through his skin.

"Will you need to stitch me up again?"

"I don't think so. May end up with a slight scar though. It'll be quite dashing."

"Good looks not ruined forever then?"

"I'd need to remove your head for that. Which, admittedly, is tempting at times." A smile flashed in the corner of her mouth. "Not right now, though."

"You're warming up to me."

Eirwen blushed. "What… what you said earlier, to the captain of the guard, about your place being here… did you mean it?"

"Of course I did. Do you still not trust me?"

"That's not it," she said quickly. "I *do* trust you. More than… I was just surprised, that's all."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why does it surprise you that I want to stay with you? You have that effect on many people."

"Yes, but…"

"But?"

"It's different, with you. Everything is different with you."

The tips of Cole's fingers reached out to graze Eirwen's, gently gliding over her knuckles. He slid his other hand underneath her chin, thumbing her cheek. "Everything's different with you, too."

Eirwen swallowed, dropping her gaze, her mouth half-open as though tripping on a word.

"Snow," he said. "When you almost sacrificed yourself, and I saw you lying there–"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Did I scare you?"

He tilted her face towards him. *I'd never known a terror like it. I stopped breathing. I felt like I'd died myself. Please don't ever do something like that again. Please, please, please–*

His mind jolted back to the day she went out to pick flowers and never returned. When the Huntsman appeared before his mother, torn and bloodied, Cole knew she was dead before the man had finished the sentence. Whether it was her loss or the sight of what he thought was her blood splashed against the Huntsman's clothes, Cole wasn't sure, but all the strength had rushed out of him

and he'd ended up on the floor.

In the days and weeks that followed, he felt like sound had been sucked from the world. Music held no meaning. He didn't play for months. She'd taken something from the palace when she left it that could never be replaced.

He had suspected that that was the worst he would ever feel about anything, ever. But it was worse, now. It wasn't music she would take. It was light and warmth. Before, he'd managed to move on, her loss an awful storm in the summer of his life. If she left his side now, it would cast the rest of his life into shapeless shadow. There would be no summer again. There would be no seasons at all. Just a twisted, harrowing *nothing* where she used to be.

Everywhere. She was everywhere. In the caverns and the caves and stone and in his soul. Her existence permeated every fragment of his life, a living ghost touching every dream, every want, every desire he'd ever had and ever would.

Do not go from this world. Do not go from my side. Do not go anywhere that I cannot follow.

"Eira," he started. It was all he could manage, as his face, his body, his entire everything, dropped towards her.

"Are you guys ready to move out?" said Wren, appearing beside them. Her gaze settled on their hands, and she raised an eyebrow, grinning crookedly.

They tore away from each other, Eirwen scrambling to her feet like a startled cat. "Yes, quite ready, thank you."

"Great. Do you two want to take the back?"

∞∞∞

For the first time in recent memory, Cole was silent in Eirwen's presence, saying barely anything to her as they journeyed back through the caverns and cities. She wished she could think of something to say, or understood his silence. Why had Wren put them at the back of the party?

Probably so we don't walk on too far ahead, she decided. *Although we'd make decent scouts…*

Then again, in a single day, the dangers of the underground had been almost swept away. What did this mean for the dwarves? Could they return to their ancient home, now? Would they want to?

Would *Onyx* want to? He was, after all, technically the leader. But it had been so long for him, for all of them, and there was no threat down here for him to fight. He did not have to be king if he didn't want to.

Like I do not want to be queen…

Jasper and Bianca –or whatever her real name was– had failed their people and been corrupted by their own greed. Even her own father, kind as he had been, had not been an attentive monarch. What was to say that five, ten, twenty years later, she didn't fall down the same path?

Was this why Cole didn't want to go back to Florin? She could not ask him again.

From time to time, after they left the main cavern, they came across a few loose shades. They seemed disorientated, drunk, barely conscious of other people sharing their space.

Cole, glad to have something to do, raced to dispatch them.

"You'll burn out, son, if you're not careful," said Wren.

"I'm fine. It's fine. Just want to be useful. I can relax when we stop to make camp, right?"

Eirwen touched his arm, stilling him immediately. "I'll take your watch. It's definitely my turn."

Wren chuckled. Merry and Oakley smiled too. Onyx said nothing, but shot a faintly dark look towards the two of them.

Finally, it was time to make camp. Eirwen shoved Cole into position and made her own bed beside his before anyone could object, almost daring Onyx to glare at her again. She hardly knew why she wanted him so close, but although she didn't want to invite any comments, she was willing to brace them.

After forcing some food down, Cole rolled over and was asleep within minutes. He'd exhausted himself. Eirwen, meanwhile, felt surprisingly fresh, and she wondered if, somehow, the sun stone had rejuvenated her as well. She hoped that was all it had done, that it hadn't installed in her immortal life or anything like that. Once upon a time, when she realised that the dwarves would still be young when she was old, she'd wanted to live for longer.

Not now. Not any more. Now she thought she could make do with this one, mortal life.

Now that there was someone else she didn't want to outlive.

She sighed, turning her thoughts and gaze away from Cole, as the others slunk into slumber.

"You're thinking very loudly, pet," said Onyx from the corner of the you. "Want to share anything?"

Eirwen swallowed. Nothing about Cole, that was for certain. But other things were playing on her mind.

"Did you know it was going to take more than a droplet of blood to revive the sun stone?"

Onyx cringed, flexing his bandaged arm. "I suspected it might, given how dead it was."

"Why… why didn't you say anything?"

"Because you would have stopped me."

"Of course I would have–"

"And it needed to be done. You know that. Because when the moment came, you were willing to do the exact same thing to save our family. No matter what it cost. No matter how crushed we would have been to lose you."

"Onyx…"

"Sacrifice is a strange thing, you know. It's utterly selfless selfishness. In the moment, it's the right thing to do, but honestly, it's easy to be brave for a moment. It's easy to die. It's the people that love you that pay the real price."

"Why didn't any of that go through your mind when you came down here, *alone?*"

"Who said it didn't?" He sighed. "It did. It was just a lot clearer when I thought it might be you paying the price."

Eirwen stilled, the weight of his words toppling over her.

"Ah," he groaned. "Look at me. I resolve one issue that's haunted me for centuries and I get all sentimental. I must be getting old." He rolled over in his pallet, pulling up the furs around him. A few minutes ticked by in silence. "Eira?"

"Yes?"

"I'll do my best not to do anything self-sacrificing in the next few decades, because I'm rather invested in watching you grow up, but… I really don't want to have to watch you die. It's not the right way around."

Eirwen smiled. "Yes, Da," she said.

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They returned to the camp before midday the following morning. Garnet and the twins raced out to greet them. Onyx hugged both of his children before flinging them towards Eirwen, marching up to his wife, and yanking her into his arms. He kissed her so deeply that, for a second, their faces seemed to morph together.

"Jasper's dead," he told her. "I killed him myself. The underground is free of him."

Garnet swallowed. "I want to punch you for leaving," she said. "But I won't, because I'm too happy to see you. But if you ever do anything so reckless again–"

"No next time," he said, his hands on her cheeks, "I promise."

"Good," she said, and punched him.

Onyx swore, clutching his nose. "Dammit, woman, I already said I was sorry!"

"No, you didn't!"

"You said you wouldn't punch me!"

"I changed my mind."

"Damn," said Cole, "why didn't we bring *her* into the Underground? I reckon she could have given the shades a run for their money."

Wren clapped him on the back, moving towards the weapons tent to unpack. "Wouldn't be fair to the shades. They wouldn't have stood a chance."

Garnet turned her attention to Eirwen, wrapping her in a hug. "Anyone see Wistal on your travels?"

"No, why?"

"Haven't seen him for a while. He said he was going back to the city but we thought maybe he went after you."

Eirwen shook her head. "Must still be back in the city."

"Must be." Garnet patted her cheek. "Are you all right, dear? You look different."

Eirwen's cheeks prickled. She hoped she wasn't blushing.

Garnet grinned. "Well, you look healthy enough, but you're covered in muck. Take a seat by the fire for an hour, pet. I'll boil up some water for a wash."

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Eirwen wasn't quite sure how she spent the next hour as Garnet filled a bathtub for her. People must have spoken to her. Food was pressed into her hands. But her mind was a strange, blurrish whir. She kept thinking of the Mirror, of what she had yet to face, of the absolute ruin of the dwarven underground being caused by one man's ambitions, of a power she was desperately trying to seize and didn't want, not at all.

Finally, she drifted into her tent, stripping off and sinking into the foamy waters. Garnet had mixed lavender into it, but it did little to relax her as she scrubbed away the dirt and grime of the last few days.

The wound on her leg had disappeared, no doubt due to the sun stone's magic. What did it mean, this pure heart of hers? What did it make her, aside from some kind of energy source?

The surface of the water stilled to a glassy level. Her mind flashed once more to the Mirror.

The power to resurrect a god.

"Snow?" said a voice on the other side of the canvas.

Eirwen squeaked. “Cole! I’m naked!”

“I can’t see anything! I just… you seemed a little out of it earlier. I figured you wouldn’t want to talk in front of anyone else. What’s going on?”

It was exactly what she needed to hear and exactly what she didn’t, all at the same time. In a split second, she was lost to a torrent of tears. Every thought, fear and feeling came cascading out of her.

“I just… I don’t know what I’m going to do!”

“Hey, it’s all right, don’t worry,” Cole’s shadow pressed against the fabric wall. “You’ll figure it out.”

“But what if I don’t?”

“I’ll help you. I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“Why? Why would you help me?”

Cole hesitated, just for a fraction of a moment. “Because I think you’re what I was waiting for.”

“What?”

“The reason I didn’t leave Aberthor. The real reason. Something was holding me back. I felt like I was meant to stay, that there was something I was supposed to do. I think, maybe, that I was waiting for you. I think I’m supposed to help you take it back.”

“Cole…” Eirwen wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

“I know. Crazy, right? Because that sort of thing sounds like fate. Real magic. The kind that barely exists any more.”

Eirwen swallowed, her heart thumping against her throat. “Real magic exists,” she said. “You’ve seen it.” It was stamped into the scar on her arm.

“Not for humans, though,” he said. “We can witness it. We can wield it. But nothing like that. That would be too good for us. Well, maybe not too good for you, apparently.”

Eirwen ignored the faint smile in his voice. There was something else there, behind it. Something behind every smirk and teasing comment. Something that had always been there. “Too good for us,” Eirwen started, “or too good for you?”

Cole froze. “Finally saw through all the false bravado, huh?”

“Cole…”

“It’s all right, Snow. I’ve come to terms with it.”

“You… you don’t think you’re good enough?”

“Of course I’m not. I mean, look at you. You lost everything and never complained, and you’re only now trying to take it back because you think it’s the right thing for other people. I had everything growing up, and I still wanted more. I was cruel to servants. I didn’t see them as people. And I was cruel to you, even when you were kind to me. I don’t deserve anything that I have. You are kind and caring and lovely, and I’m the son of a monster–”

“You are not your mother,” said Eirwen forcefully. “You are *nothing* like her, and sure, perhaps you were a bit of an ass when you were young, but you’re the one standing beside me, trying to help me take back the throne for all the right reasons–”

“Not quite all of them,” he said. “But… thank you.”

“What… what do you mean?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, right now.”

Eirwen rather suspected it *did* matter, but something else mattered more. “Cole, you are one of the best people I’ve ever met.”

He paused. “Be serious.”

"I *am* being serious."

"You remember what I was like five years ago–"

"Exactly! I know *just* how bad you can be, and I know just how much you've changed. And how hard that must have been for you. It's easy to be good when your life is easy–"

"Mine was, though."

"Was it? Your father ignored you, you were taken from your home against your will, you lost the only man who ever treated you like a son, and you're trying to overthrow your own *mother*, the one person who has always cared about you. And you're doing it because it's the right thing to do. How many other people could do such a thing?"

Cole swallowed, his silence heavy with the weight of her words. "You could."

Eirwen sighed. "You're a good person, Cole. You are every bit as good as I am, and even though you absolutely *infuriate* me at times, I do find you just a little bit funny and charming."

Cole chuckled. "I thought I was supposed to be cheering you up?"

"I'm all right now."

"You don't need to shelve your own pain all the time to deal with others'."

"Why not? It works well."

"At what?"

"Helping me deal with it."

"Deal with it, or ignore it?"

"Is there a difference?"

Cole sighed. "Quite a bit, actually. Are you finished with your bath?"

"Almost. Why?"

"Let me know when you're decent."

She climbed out, drying herself quickly, and squirming into the loosest, warmest clothes she could find. "I'm ready," she said.

Cole walked into the tent, pulling her into his arms, and kissed the top of her head. "Whatever you need," he said, "whenever you need it, I'm here."

"Same," she said, snuggling further into him. "Whatever you need, I'm here for you, too. But right now, this is actually pretty good, if... if I can stay a little longer?"

"You can stay there forever, if you like."

"Cole…" She glanced upwards, deep into the depths of those dark, utterly beautiful eyes. Eyes she could fall into, because they were open, open to her.

He cupped her cheeks. "If anyone catches me in here, I'm dead."

"I was alone with you in Oakley's clinic."

"That was before," said Cole. "Things are different now. And the others know it too." He gazed at her. "Things *are* different now, right? I didn't imagine that, did I?"

"No," said Eirwen, burying herself in his chest to avoid answering. "You didn't imagine it."

"Snow… you don't like the fact that you like me, do you?"

Eirwen froze. "Cole–"

"It's all right. I won't push you. I just want to be honest. I'm rather done with hiding how I feel about you." He kissed her temple, forcing a weak smile. "I'm going to go for a walk for a bit. I'll be back in time for the party."

"Party?"

"Onyx just buried a centuries-old demon. They're having a party. With a roast hog. Not a roast cave crawler, a roast *hog*. I've forgotten what real food tastes like. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Cole–"

"It's all right, Eirwen," he said, drifting out of her arms. "Please believe me when I say that as long as you're all right, I really am too."

"Are you… are you sure?" she said, trying to ignore the weight of his first comment.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because I think you're frightened of turning into your mother. I think that's the reason you never went back to Florin. And I understand that. I do. I understand that because I'm terrified of becoming like her, too. Or Jasper. Or even my own parents."

Cole stilled. "Eira–"

"And we can be afraid, right? We're allowed to be afraid. We can be afraid together. And then maybe we won't be so alone anymore."

Cole exhaled, the breath shuddering out of him. "You may be difficult to read, but you're pretty good at reading others, aren't you?"

He rushed back towards her, sweeping her into his arms and placing a soft, deep kiss on her lips. Every second he was against her, her body unwound, tying itself to his until she felt they'd become knotted together irrevocably.

"I really have to go," he said, "just for a bit. I just… why is it so hard to let go of you?"

Eirwen suspected she knew why. She suspected he did too. And she did not want him to let go.

He kissed her cheek. "I'll be back soon. We'll talk some more."

He headed for the door.

"Cole–"

"Yes?" he said hopefully.

"Take… take care."

A weak smile ghosted his lips. "Anything for you, My Lady."

He was gone before she could call him back, or find the words she really wanted to say.

You don't like the fact that you like me, do you?

Was that really it? Or was it something far more simple, and much more terrifying?

Part Four:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.

--Alfred Lord Tennyson--



Chapter Twenty:

A Feast for the Soul

Cole returned to the camp just as night had fallen. It was ablaze with light. A great bonfire was burning in the centre, Merry and some of the rebels were roasting a hog in a covered area to the side, and torches were lit throughout the clearing. Music was blaring. Fine, rousing tunes, fast pipes and hard strings. People were laughing and dancing, the twins running about like wild things, painting people's faces with old dwarven markings.

Garnet bustled towards him and placed a tankard of warm, spiced cider in his frozen hands. "Drink up, lad, it's going to be a cold night."

A thick frost had settled on the ground, and snowflakes were beginning to fall. It didn't seem to bother anyone, didn't deter any of the dancers.

Eirwen was among them, twirling in a breezy white gown, her cape long since abandoned on a log nearby. Her cheeks were red, her face beaming and giddy.

He had never seen anything quite so perfect.

"I know that look," said Garnet.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Did something happen between you two whilst you were Under the Mountain?"

"Um…"

"That's a yes, then." She chuckled, patting his arm. "Onyx already have words with you?"

"Yes. Very stern ones."

"Well, mine won't be. You make her happy."

Cole's heart thumped in his chest. "Did she say anything to you?"

Garnet shook her head, making his heart sink. "No. But she doesn't need to. I haven't seen her like this in a while."

"She… she wasn't happy earlier."

"No, she wasn't." Garnet sighed. "She doesn't have the heart for all this killing, you know. The stomach, maybe. The head? Definitely. But not the heart."

"What do you mean?"

"When she first came here, Onyx was insistent that she earn her keep, so Wren took her out into the forests to learn to hunt. She's got a good aim with a bow, but the first deer she downed didn't die immediately. She took her dagger and slit its throat. Wren was impressed, but later that night, I found her sobbing behind the barn. She was just trying to spare it any further pain. She begged for something else to do, so Onyx took her Under the Mountain. Taught her to fight shades. They don't scream when you cut them. Eirwen… Eirwen can't stand to see anyone in pain. That's why she's doing this, but it's hard to carry all of that burden yourself, when everyone's pain is yours…"

Cole thought about how she'd been when he'd been shot. She'd made no secret of her dislike for him, at least back then, but she looked after him nonetheless. And the night she'd overheard his mother, when her own heart must have ached, she'd come for him, to see how *he* was.

He liked to think he would have done the same for her. He certainly would *now*. But for anyone? No. Eirwen was different. A pure heart indeed.

"She's… a good person."

"The best," Garnet agreed. She looked at him sharply, and he half expected some kind of warning, but instead she tugged on his chin. "But you might just be worthy, giant boy."

"I think… there's no way Snow feels like that towards me."

Garnet shook her head. "She may not have said anything, but I know. She's a kind soul, but she's guarded. Took her two years to call me Mama Gee. You can love easily and cautiously at the same time."

"I… I'm still not sure–"

Garnet patted his arm. "Well, best you be sure before you say anything. But I rather suspect your own heart is not what you're doubting. Don't be shy. Sometimes she needs things spelt out for her."

She bustled off to disperse more tankards. Cole necked his back, and went to join the dancers. He didn't get far before being roped into a jig with Ivy, who brazenly seized his hands and jolted him against the dancefloor. She giggled the entire way through, and then dragged him towards Eirwen.

"I've just been dancing with a prince!" she announced, still clutching his hand tightly. "And I don't care what you say, I think he's very charming."

Eirwen looked down at the floor.

"You don't think I'm charming?" Cole tried to sound serious.

"I… you *can* be charming, and well you know it." She took his hand from Ivy's. "Dance with me."

"I'm afraid I don't know the steps to this one…"

"There are no steps, and well you know that, too!" She growled at him. "Why are you doing this again?"

"I like the noises you make when you're annoyed at me."

Eirwen groaned, linking her arm in his, and yanked him back to the dancefloor. The heat of the fire had exploded into the cold night air. He felt no chill, only wild, giddy heat.

He danced with her until his sides split, until his cheeks ached from smiling and his calves began to seize, then they feasted on cider and roasted pork with apples, tucking themselves away in the quietest corner they could find.

He waited until she was done eating, and slid a hand into his breast pocket.

"I have something for you," he said.

"A gift?"

"Sort of. It belongs to you already. I noticed how you were with the comb, and the armour, and I thought maybe… maybe you wanted a little bit of home."

"The cottage is my home–"

"Eira," he said softly, "it's all right to miss where you come from."

"Do… do you? Do you miss Florin?"

"Not as much as I used to," he said, "but yes."

"Tell me about it."

"It's… it's been so long since I visited its shores I barely remember what it was like to live there. Small details stay with me, though. The scent of baking rosemary. The terracotta tiles. The smell of the air after rainfall."

"You hated Aberthor, when you first came here."

"It's beauty grew on me," he said, "as did you."

Eirwen blushed, her cheeks turning apple-red.

Cole fumbled inside his jacket pocket and brought out a little wooden bird. "I was fairly sure this wouldn't be cursed," he explained, dropping it into her palm, "but you can use the amulet to

check, if you like."

She thumbed the wooden creature, covering every chipped inch of it with her fingertips. The gleam in her eyes was worth all he'd risked to fetch it. "I… remember this. I *loved* this. My–"

"Your father bought it for you, the first time he took you into the market." He grinned at her. "Niamh told me."

Eirwen lunged forward and closed the minute gap between them, curling her fingers in Cole's shirt and burying her face against his chest. The wooden bird fell to her lap. Any stiffness in Cole melted away. His arms encircled her.

"My mother got rid of most of your belongings," he said. "But I took this from your room before she could. I barely knew why, I'd done such a good job of convincing myself I didn't care about you, back then. But I knew I needed something to remember you by. Your father always called you 'little dove'. I think it reminded me of him, too."

"Did you go back into the palace to get this?"

"Um, yes," he said. "But I was *very* careful. No one saw me. Promise."

"Thank you," she said. She picked it up again, examining its painted face, every etched feather. "I should have Merry make it a partner."

"Another dove?"

"No," she said, smoothing a lock of his hair. "A raven, I think."

Cole's heart almost exploded in his chest. He grabbed her hands. "Come with me," he said.

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They walked a little further from the party, the music fading to a gentle hum, into a clearing behind the tents. The snow was falling thick and fast here. Cole loosened his cape and draped it around her shoulders. The faint light of the fire sparkled in his eyes. She stared at the inky sky, alight with stars.

Cole did not follow her gaze. It remained threaded on her, intense and unwavering.

"What? What is it?" she asked.

"I'm wishing I was a poet or a painter."

"What?"

"So I would have some way of expressing how wondrously, unequivocally beautiful you are right now."

"What–"

"I mean it. You are, in this moment, the most beautiful thing I have ever beheld, and even that doesn't do you justice."

"I… I was definitely prettier at the ball–"

He shook his head. "No, you're more beautiful now. More *you* now."

"Cole… what did you mean, before? When you said that you weren't helping me for all the right reasons?"

"You haven't figured it out, huh?" He shook his head.

"I… I have an idea."

"I like you, Snow. I like you a lot. You… you don't have to say anything. I don't want to put you on the spot. And I'm aware that the timing may be less than ideal. But, see, the thing is, I'm… I'm

falling in love with you. Or rather… I suspect I'm there already. I've never known *anyone* as fierce or as gentle as you are. Since the moment we were reunited, I felt this inexplicable pull towards you. I told myself that I was obligated to help you because of what my mother did, I told myself I just wanted to see you because I was lonely, because our few conversations were quite literally the most enjoyable I'd had in… in years, if not ever. And all of that is true. But I want to be near you because I've fallen for you in a way that is quite honestly terrifying in its permeance. I'm not sure I can scrub you out of me. I'm not sure I want to. The thought of you not being in the world makes me sick to my stomach. No, worse than that, sick to my soul. It makes me want to cave in just thinking about it."

He looked at her, as if waiting for a reaction.

She couldn't give him one.

"Silly, right? I wasn't nearly this upset the last time I thought you were dead." He reached out to touch a lock of her hair. "I was upset, though. More than I let on. But mostly for selfish reasons, back then. I felt alone without you. Now I think I'd die without you. Now I think I'd happily trade my life for yours." He waited. "That wasn't too impoetic, was it?"

Eirwen stared at him.

"Say something, Snow."

Eirwen's words turned gummy in her mouth. They fell away from her.

Say something. Say anything! Don't let him think you feel nothing at all–

Because whatever she felt, however tangled and confused her feelings, she felt far, far more than nothing.

Yet even his name was beyond her.

He made a gesture of dismissal, turned to move away, but she reached for him, snatching his hand and throwing her arms around his neck. She pushed her lips against his.

She just meant it to be a brief, fleeting kiss, yet the second she dropped back, Cole's eyes turned dark and liquid, and her insides transformed into lava.

She closed the gap again, her mouth hot against his. His hands went to her waist, curling into her clothes and weaving her against him. He murmured her name when she gave him a moment to breathe.

Not Snow.

Eirwen.

He tasted of snowflakes and spiced cider and firelight, and each kiss made her want to crawl out of her flesh and into his. There was a burning deep within her. She was kindling, and he the flame.

Finally, she found the strength to pull away.

"Cole?"

"Yes?" his voice was light, hopeful and dazed in the same, desperate breath.

"I'm sorry."

He grinned. "What for?"

"I… I don't have an answer for you, if… if you had a question. Not yet."

"Right."

"But I… I really wanted to do that again."

"I was sensing *some* enthusiasm…"

"I'm sorry to make you wait."

He cupped her face in his large hands, and kissed her temple. "Don't be. You didn't break my heart, which was more than I was hoping for." His hands slid down to her fingers.

"The last thing I want to do is hurt you," she said, "but there's–"

"A lot going on. It's complicated. We haven't really *known* each other that long, not… not like this. It's all right, Eira. I understand."

She sighed, shaking her head. "I think I preferred you when you were being unreasonable. At least I knew what to do, then. This… this is new, and confusing, and–"

"Yeah," he said, his hands still holding her fingertips, "I feel you." He tightened his grip on that tiny part of her. "I'm… I'm not sure I want to let go, just yet."

"You don't have to." She pulled his face down to hers again, drinking in his kiss. He fell against her and she stumbled backwards into a tree, sending a flurry of snow cascading down on them, which melted away in minutes under the hot pressure of their kisses. The whole world burned away behind them.

"You're making it even harder to let go," Cole breathed, his voice ragged.

"I know," said Eirwen. "Sorry?"

"I'm not entirely sure I can be mad at you…" he said, his fingers playing with the clasp of her cloak.

She grabbed the scruff of his shirt and pulled him down to her level again. "Then kiss me again."

He grinned wickedly. "Until you tell me to stop."

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They kissed for what felt like hours, under the light of the silvery moon, as the snow piled thickly around them, dusting every surface of the clearing with pristine, sparkling light. Eirwen's lips felt numb, her body burning beneath her layers of clothes.

"Can I ask you for a favour?" she whispered into him.

"Anything," he grinned, his fingers tight against her back.

"Would you… would you come back to my tent with me? Not… not to do anything. Just… just to lie there with me?"

Cole blinked. "Of course. But… can I ask why?"

"Because my bed is very cold," she said. "And you are very warm."

"You could bunk with the twins."

"All right," she said, "maybe I want *you* in my bed. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Cole grinned wickedly. He opened his mouth, but she placed two fingers across his lips. "Don't you *dare* think of making me repeat it, or making a joke about me begging you, or anything like that at all."

"Duly noted," he said, his voice muffled.

She seized his hand, and dragged him back across the campsite and into her tent. She shoved him down on the bunk.

"If Onyx catches me here, I'm a dead man," he said, shuffling off his boots.

Eirwen grinned, shedding her cloak and kicking off her shoes. She stripped her outer clothes. Cold air smacked against her single layer. She tried not to shiver. "Have you seen how much he's drunk tonight? He won't remember his own name by morning."

"I'll forget my own if you take off any more layers."

Eirwen blushed, sliding onto his lap and pulling the furs over them. "You're freezing," she said.

"I gave you my cloak!"

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I was having the single most romantic moment of my life, and I didn't want to ruin it by complaining about the *cold*."

She shook her head, and pushed him back against the bunk, hauling the covers over their heads and sliding her hands over his cold flesh. "For the record," she said, "this is *not* just for warmth, but I do feel at least a *little* obligated to try and warm you up."

He found her mouth, feeling along her face with his nose, and kissed it. "You are too kind, Snow."

"I have my moments." She lay her head down in the crook of his arm, her body wrapped around him. "So… single most romantic moment, huh?"

She could almost feel his glare. "Oh… hush you."

"What's the matter, Prince? Can dish it but you can't take it?"

"You're teasing me."

"You make it too easy."

She snuggled further into him, wishing she had another way to hold him. She couldn't grab onto him tightly enough. Cole breathed underneath her, and she listened to the steady thump of his heart like it was the first time she'd ever heard anything like it.

He warmed, he softened, he slipped into sleep. She pulled the covers down, just a fraction, gaining enough light to make out his crisp profile.

She kissed his cheek. "I'm… I'm not very good at expressing myself," she whispered to his sleeping form. "At least not… not when it comes to matters of the heart. It's… it's different, with the others. The dwarves, I mean. After my father died, I thought I'd never feel anything for anyone ever again. Then I fell into their home and was made to feel so much like a part of their family, it was impossible not to fall in love with them. It's… it's a bit like that with you, too. It's impossible not to care for you, but I need to be sure before I hurt you more." She kissed his sleeping mouth. "The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you."

Or let myself be hurt.

But she realised, in that moment, which one she was willing to risk more, like the moment when she watched him disappear under the masses of shades and was prepared to offer her own life for his.

And she would do it again, and again.

And she rather suspected that meant she had her answer.

Chapter Twenty-One:

The Morning After

Cole was gone when she woke, the bed arctic without him.

One day, we'll wake up together, she thought wistfully, reaching out to grab her clothes.

They weren't on the chair where she left them. For one long, horrible moment, she thought that Cole had reverted to his old ways and hidden them from her in an attempt to force her to walk around the camp half-dressed, but then she found them folded in the bed beside her. He must have put them there to warm them up for her.

Her chest glowed at the thought, and she hugged them before pulling them on over her head and heading outside.

The campsite was awash with white. The logs had been dug out of the carpets of snow, and rebels sat around it, nursing bowls of porridge. Merry stirred the cauldron.

"No Garnet?" asked Eirwen, fetching a bowl.

"Nope."

"Did she go home last night?"

"Haha, no."

"Then where is she?"

"She and Onyx went for a walk last night and have not yet returned."

"Oh," said Eirwen. "Should… should we be worried?"

Wren and the Huntsman both snorted. "They're fine," they said.

"It's a *really* long walk…" said Juniper, appearing at her elbow.

"Hmm. Yes. It is. I wonder what on earth they could be doing."

There was a snort from behind her, and Cole appeared. He leaned over her and shovelled a spoonful of her porridge into his mouth before running back to the relative safety of the campfire. Eirwen tried not to smile, and joined him a few minutes later.

"You could have stayed longer last night after all," she said, as quiet as she could.

"I value my life," he whispered back. "But… I would have stayed all night, if I could."

Eirwen took the end of her spoon, and traced the words *one day* in the snow, before quickly stamping it out.

Cole smiled, and poked her in the ribs.

"Ah, good, you're awake," said Onyx, plonking himself on the log next to her.

"Where have you been?" asked Eirwen.

"What do you mean? Been here all morning."

Garnet grinned from the space beside the cauldron, humming a tune under her breath like she'd been there the entire time too.

"Well, good morning to you too. What's our plan for today?"

"Our plan for the day is to look over our options. A full-scale assault would still be risky. She may still have control of the shades that are left; we can't rule it out. We also don't know what object she picked up and I suspect we've lost our man on the inside."

Cole looked down at his feet. "I could probably still get in and find out what's going on, getting out might be a little trickier if she discovers I'm there, but she's not going to kill me–"

"You are *not* going back in there," snapped Eirwen.

"If it's still an option, we shouldn't dismiss it. I could get word out through carrier pigeon or something–"

"I still vote assination, if anyone's interested," said Wren.

"She'll see you coming," the Huntsman advised.

"I am small and *very* stealthy, as you are well aware–"

"We're *not* killing her," said Eirwen firmly. "Not unless… not unless we absolutely have to."

Wren sighed, "spoilsport" at the same time Cole mouthed, "thank you." She wanted to squeeze his hand, but she didn't dare do it with an audience.

One day, one day, one day.

A dark thought she'd kept buried in the back of her mind pulsed up inside her. What if one day never came? What if they lost, if they went up against his mother and she was the victor?

Cole tilted his head. "You all right?"

"Cole, I–"

"We're going to need more allies," Onyx announced. "I'll take some of the rebels into the city and see if we can scout some. Anyone have connections in the palace?"

"Should I come?" asked Eirwen.

He shook his head. "Too noticeable right now. Write another letter to Marie. See if you can drum up some support from her."

Eirwen nodded. She'd had another letter from Marie waiting for her yesterday, asking for an update, but she hadn't had a chance to respond.

"Is there anything I should be doing?" asked Cole.

Onyx buckled, as if he'd completely forgotten Cole was there. "Check the traps with Wren. We're low on food provisions."

"Yes, sir." He shot Eirwen a look as he got up to collect his equipment. *It's almost like he's trying to keep us apart,* it seemed to say.

Eirwen smiled at him, and said nothing.

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She tried to pen an answer to Marie, politely asking if she knew of any nobles who might support her, but she couldn't finish it. She was struggling with her words. Onyx was better at this. He was gruff in person but he was excellent with written words. Together, she imagined, they made quite an effective team.

She was going to need so much help if she ever ascended the throne. The thirteen years of preparation had slid away from her in forests and the Underground, or perhaps they'd never been there to begin with. Her father had raised her with all manner of courtly pursuits, but the histories and political side of things had been shelved and ignored. Unimportant.

She could catch up on her reading. She could relearn what she'd lost. But she needed someone who understood nobility in a way she never had, who was confident and assured–

She needed Cole. She *wanted* Cole.

Why was it so hard to tell him that?

She sighed and scrunched up her third letter. She'd accidentally written Cole's name into it. Three times. Marie would tease her deliciously if she knew.

After an hour or so of trying to organise her thoughts, tidying her tent, polishing her sword and

sorting her equipment, there was a call from outside, a thudding on hooves in the snow, a braying of horses. Eirwen shot for her weapon and ran from the tent, whipping across the site.

Two dozen men on horseback shifted to a halt. They made no move to attack. They were not the Queen's guards.

"Hold your fire!" said the man at the head. "We come to aid you."

Eirwen sheathed her weapon. "Lord Hammersmith."

He slid from his horse, dropping into a bow. "Your Highness. I apologise it has taken me a while, but I have secured some men for your cause. We are at your command."

"Thank you, Lord Hammersmith," said Eirwen, keeping her words steady. She looked desperately to Onyx for instruction, but he only nodded and gestured for her to continue. "We are eternally grateful for any and all assistance you can offer."

"It is the least I can do," he said. "Men– make camp."

Eirwen called Hammersmith over to Onyx and gave the official introduction, instructing him to let him know everything about the strength and skill of his men.

"It's not quite enough, is it?" she asked Onyx.

"No," he said. "But it's a start."

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Over the next few days, more and more armed volunteers, guards, knights and nobles arrived at the site, spurred by the actions of Hammersmith and his men. Onyx called Eirwen into the war room when their numbers reached two hundred.

"We should act soon," he said.

Eirwen paled. "Are you sure? The numbers–"

"Though the Queen commands similar numbers, she still has the upper hand. She always will, attacking from the castle. We could wait a month, but brute force is unlikely to ever win the day. Castles are rarely ever taken by force, and a large scale battle could go on for months. Not to mention we don't know her plans, what advantage the Mirror gives her, what she took from the depths. We need to act quickly before she makes her next move."

Eirwen inhaled. "Then what do you suggest?"

"A small party sneaks into the city, a few at a time. You among them. We'll use the faulty glamour ring; it should make you look different enough to pass through the gates undetected. We head to the palace, the knights drawing the attention of her forces to the city gates. We sneak in and confront her, offering her a final chance to step down peacefully. If she doesn't…" Onyx shook his head. "Assination is still less risky, just so you know."

A bitter taste rose on the back of her tongue. "I nearly killed her, you know, the day of the ball? There was a moment when I could have done it. But I didn't. I thought at the time it was because I was too much of a coward, but I swear, I never felt less myself than when I was contemplating killing her. It was like a monster had crawled into my skin. I don't want to start my reign that way. I know… I know she deserves to die. I know history might remember me as a hero. But I would never, ever see myself as one. I would think I was as bad as her, every day, for the rest of my life. It's selfish, I know. But I don't want to feel like that. I don't want my reign to begin like hers did."

Onyx sighed. "No wonder Janus wants your heart, lass. So few are like it."

"Do you think I'm being childish?"

"I think you're being you. And here I was worrying you didn't want to kill her because you were soft on the boy."

"I *am* soft on the boy," Eirwen said, without hesitation, "but that isn't the only reason I want to avoid killing her."

The smallest of smiles played on the corner of Onyx's mouth, but he quickly quashed it.

"What is it?"

"I dislike how fast you're growing," he said. "And I'm not *entirely* sure I like the boy, but… but if he makes you happy, then I suppose I have to like him. I can't hate anything that makes you happy."

Eirwen wound a lock of hair around her finger, avoiding his gaze. "Good," she said, "because I rather think he might be my Garnet."

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There was no time to waste, declared Onyx. He drew up a plan, brought the dwarves together to discuss it, and told no one outside of Eirwen and Cole the specifics.

"We cannot afford the Queen using the Mirror to discover it from another soldier," he explained. "But if we managed to keep Eirwen hidden for so long, it should be safe to talk amongst the few of us. The rest of the men will find out on the day in question. Not the greatest move for morale, but it is what it is."

"When do we strike?" Eirwen asked.

"Tomorrow," he said. "We'll start moving at dawn."

Eirwen felt something slither out of her. Tomorrow. So soon. If it went well, she would end it on a throne. If it went badly, that dawn would likely be her last. Every certainty was thrown into shadow.

Not being able to say anything, to be free with that information, haunted her for the rest of the day. The rest of the camp carried on like nothing was amiss. She wondered how many would be alive tomorrow, and hated that she knew and they didn't. Every laugh mocked her, their ignorance painful.

Cole put his arm around her shoulder, and said nothing. It had been difficult over the last few days to find any time to be together, a few traded kisses had been all they'd had time for.

Time was scrambling away from them, and she'd still not found the way to tell him.

Night came all at once and far too quickly, the silence of the camp as loud as a waterfall. Unending. Crushing. She could not sleep. The dark had edges, the cold blistering and overwhelming.

She gave up after an hour and tip-toed into the tent Cole was sharing with the rest of the rebels, feeling especially grateful he'd not been shoved in with any of the dwarves. Onyx would have been on her like a cave crawler the minute she'd crossed the threshold.

She crept towards Cole's bunk and crouched down by his side. He was barely visible beneath the piles of furs, with only a single cheek exposed to the air. As much as she wanted him awake right now, she also just wanted to watch him, felt like she could pass hours just fixating on each perfect curve of his face.

She should probably tell him that, shouldn't she?

There was so much she wanted to tell him...

"Cole," she whispered. "Can you wake up?"

He said nothing, and she was worried about raising her voice any higher. She stroked his cheek.

He moved slightly under her touch, but didn't rise.

She bent forward and kissed him, deepening the kiss until he started to press back. A hand slid from the blankets and gripped the back of her head, pulling her closer. He murmured something against her lips.

"Snow," he said, a lot more intelligibly, "am I dreaming?"

"No," she said. She glanced around them. "Would you… would you come with me?"

Cole's eyes were large and intense. "Of course," he said. He pulled on his boots without another word, wrapping his cape over his shoulders and taking her hand all too readily as she steered him outside and back to her own tent. He said nothing as she sat him down on her bunk and turned to face him, her fingers still laced in his.

"I'm sorry for waking you," she said.

"It's all right. Is something the matter?"

"No. I just… I didn't want to be alone tonight, and… and there's no one I'd rather be awake with than you. Sorry. That's selfish–"

"No, it isn't," he said. "I'm actually rather honoured. There's no else I'd rather be awake with, either." He stroked a lock of hair behind her ear. "No one else I'd rather be with at all."

Eirwen leaned across and kissed him, moving her hands to his cheeks as his arms slid around her waist, gathering her closer.

"Stay with me," she said.

"Tonight?"

Always, always, always. "Tonight," she confirmed, and slid her fingers down towards where his shirt parted. "Stay with me tonight and… and *be with me*."

Cole's throat bobbed. He looked slightly nervous. "Are you sure this is… the right time?"

"It might be the only time."

"I don't think I can bear that to be the case."

"Me neither." Her throat grew tight. "I don't think… I'm not sure if…"

"What?"

"I don't think any amount of time with you would be enough," she said, with some difficulty. "But I don't want to waste what we have. Please. Stay with me."

Cole kissed her, long and hard, and she slid easily into his lap. "I picked up the proper, er, precautions," he said. "Earlier in the week. Just in case. Slightly presumptuous, I know, but if you want to–"

"I want to."

"We'll have to keep the noise down."

Eirwen felt warm for the first time in days. "I'm not entirely sure how it all goes."

Cole grinned. "Luckily for you, I'm an excellent teacher in that department. I don't mind showing you the ropes." He placed his hands against her waist. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Eirwen nodded, coiling her hands into fists to disguise the trembling. "Sorry," she said. "I want to do this. I really, *really* want to do this, I'm just… I'm a little nervous. You have a lot more experience than me and–"

He kissed her gently. "I had to have you beat at *something,"* he said. "Besides…" He cupped her face, and guided it towards his chest, pressing her ear against his heart. It was beating thunderously. "Hear that?"

"Are you nervous too?"

"Terribly. Just because I know what I'm doing doesn't mean you'll enjoy it… and I really,

really want you to enjoy it. I'm going to try exceedingly hard to ensure–"

Eirwen seized his face and pushed him back against the bunk, her kisses rough and wild. He sighed upon release. "Well, you have that part down, at least," he said. "Ten out of ten–"

"Stop talking."

He grabbed her round the waist and flipped her over. "Talking is important," he said, kissing her neck. "But I'll keep the conversation to a minimum, if you desire…"

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She lay in his arms after, or he lay in hers, it was difficult to tell. One hand drew lazy circles on her stomach, the other wound through her hair. She felt strange. Worn, tired, bright, confused, different, but above all filled with a new kind of warmth, one she never wanted to let go of.

Cole's mouth was against her ear. "Eira, I have to go."

"No," she whispered, "you don't."

"If your grumpy dwarf dad sees me sneaking out of here, he'll kill me."

"No, he won't. I'm the only one that's allowed to kill you now. That's the rule."

"Oh, is it now?"

"Yes."

Cole kissed her brow. "You're cute when you threaten me."

"You're annoying always." She wrapped her arms around his waist.

"If that's the case, why aren't you letting me go?"

"For some reason, I still like you. Even though you are unnecessarily attractive and you make terrible jokes."

He snorted. "Unnecessarily attractive?"

"You *know* you're attractive, Cole."

"I do, but it's nice to have my beauty recognised by the right person." He seized her face and kissed her, his hands resting on her cheeks for a long while afterwards, staring at her with a reverance that caught her a little off guard. "You are beyond beautiful," he whispered, his words soft as feathers, "To the world, probably, but certainly to me. I could spend my life searching those underground caverns and never find anything of your ilk."

"Hmm. You're right. That is nice."

"Nice? *Nice?* That was poetry, my darling! Some of my finest! Appreciate me, woman!"

Eirwen grabbed his middle and buried her head inside his bare chest. "I do," she whispered. "I do appreciate you. And I… I like you rather a lot."

"*Rather a lot,*" Cole sighed. "I suppose I can be content with that."

Eirwen squeezed him. "Don't go," she said. "Stay with me until morning. Just in case… just in case we…"

Cole kissed the top of her head, pulling her body tighter against his. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. "I could die quite happily in your arms, although if we could delay that by fifty years of so, I'd be very grateful."

"Fifty… fifty years?" Eirwen murmured. "That's a long time."

"Not long enough," he said. "And you were the one who said no time would ever be enough first, so there."

She lay in his arms for some time, trying to find the courage to tell him, but by the time she

could unlatch the words from inside her chest, he had fallen asleep.

Tomorrow, she promised. *I'll tell him tomorrow.*

At the same time, she prayed tomorrow never came, that the dawn held itself back, that the clock stopped ticking, and nothing outside of this tent ever existed again.

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She woke again before dawn, awake and alert, pressed up against Cole. She did not want to sleep again. Sleep was like letting water slip through your fingers during a drought, like tossing silver into a wishing well instead of pennies. A foolish waste.

My wish is here.

A strange, invasive kind of coldness prickled through the air that had nothing to do with the temperature. The campfire crackled. She did not know who was on watch right now, but uneasy quietness penetrated the dark.

"Cole?" she whispered.

He did not stir. Just as well, she thought. She was being silly. Foolish. There was nothing amiss. She'd just peek outside, just to check…

She pulled on her boots, wrapping a cloak around her shoulders, and unpegged the tent.

The rebel on watch was slumped in his seat, dozing with unnatural stillness. An old woman, shrivelled and hunched with age, sat beside him, warming her bony hands by the fire. Her knuckles were swollen and prune-like, bitten with cold, but a large ring sat on one of her fingers.

Next to her in the snow was a basket of apples, glistening red in the faint puckering light of dawn.

"You're up early, dear," the old woman rasped. "I hope you don't mind an old crone like me warming herself by the fire a wee bit. It's such a cold night…"

Eirwen stiffened, wishing she'd grabbed her sword. "What are the apples for, crone?"

"Oh, for you, my dear, or anyone that wants one. Please, take it, as a thank you for letting me stay."

Eirwen narrowed her eyes. "You must think I'm an idiot."

"Whatever makes you say that, dear?"

"You've already fooled me twice, Bianca. Or whatever your real name is. It wasn't going to work again."

The crone sighed, shifting upright. Her spine uncurled and she twisted the ring on her finger, reverting to her old appearance. "The apple would have been so much easier." She clicked her fingers. Guards shifted under the snow, emerging from the trees, appearing from behind the tents. They were surrounded, probably outnumbered. Even if everyone was raised and awake–

"If you wake them," said Bianca, "they will die. And you will have to watch."

Eirwen's breath stilled in her chest. Her heart pounded. She had no idea what to do.

"What would the apples have done?"

"They're laced with a powerful death potion; it would have stolen your breath but left your heart intact for the Mirror."

A flash of something in the dwarven caverns, a painting of a man with a cursed piece of fruit. Was that to do with the Mirror? What had the writing above it said?

"Do you know?" she asked. "What the Mirror really is?"

"An ancient one," Bianca replied. "Of unimaginable power. And when I release him, he will reward me a thousandfold."

"Or just kill you."

Bianca laughed. "No. Not after all we've done together."

"He isn't your friend."

A darkness passed over Bianca's features. "What would a child like you know?" she spat.

Eirwen steeled herself. A voice murmured something from behind her. A hot bit of anger fashioned itself into confidence. "Where your son spent last night, for one."

Cole arrived at the flap of the tent, hastily dressed and dishevelled. He stopped the minute his eyes settled on the queen.

"Mother," he said.

Her gaze darkened. "Cole," she said icily. "Unhappy as I am to see you here, I am glad, at least, that you are unhurt. Come to me now; all will be forgiven. I know how easy it is to be… *seduced* by someone."

"Um, yes, no, it… it didn't happen like that." His eyes glanced around the rest of the camp, at the army around them, the slumped sentry. They darted back to the tent, towards his abandoned weapon.

"You wouldn't attack your own mother, would you?"

Cole stepped closer to Eirwen's side. "To save her, there isn't much I wouldn't do."

Bianca's eyes boiled. "You don't know what it is you say!"

She lunged towards Eirwen, but Cole cut across her. A bolt went flying.

"*Stop*!" hissed the queen. "Do not hit the prince!"

There was a shouting within the tents, a thumping, rustling, hollering. Wren bolted from a nearby tent, crossbow already docked, the Huntsman streaming out behind her with his axe raised. A dozen other rebels followed suit.

A moment stretched out before Eirwen, endless and touchable. A thousand seconds, a thousand thoughts, a thousand abandoned solutions all crammed into it. All failed. There was nothing she could do, no bargain she could summon, no action she could complete fast enough, before complete and total pandemonium erupted on the fresh snowy ground.

Within seconds, it was stung with blood.

Eirwen didn't know who struck first, whose order they acted on, she didn't know anything. She dived back into her tent and seized her sword, raising it just in time to meet the steel of a knight that came charging in afterwards.

She kicked him backwards, rolling over her cot, seizing a sheet to fling in his face. She cut the back of one of his hamstrings and sent him floundering to the floor, but he still lashed out wildly, his blade shredding air.

"I don't want to hurt you," Eirwen rushed.

Something crashed against the back of his head. A lantern.

"I have no such reservations," Cole declared.

He seized Eirwen's arm, slashing through the back of the tent and pulling her through the gap. Two more swords rose up to greet them.

"You need to run," he hissed at her.

Eirwen shook her head, parrying the blade, rolling over in the snow and flipping it up into the face of her enemy. The few seconds was all she needed to disarm him. He made a frantic bid for his abandoned weapon, but she swiped across his cheek. Blood spurted across the white floor.

She did not mean to go that deep. She did not want to hurt him.

I hate this I hate this I hate it.

"Stop!" she shrieked, kicking the sword out of reach. "Just leave! Just *go*. I don't want to hurt you!"

The man blinked up at her.

"Run!" she told him. She looked back at Cole's opponent. "Both of you– just give up and live! You have that option!"

The wounded one listened. Cole's didn't until she punched the back of his head with the hilt of her sword.

"I'm not leaving them!" she yelled at Cole. "I'm not leaving *you*."

Cole blinked for a moment, his jaw tight. "She doesn't want my heart to resurrect a god," he said quickly. "You have to get out of here–"

"Would you leave me, if the positions were reversed?"

"No," he said slowly, his voice quiet. "But that's because I–"

A bolt fired over his head. Eirwen yanked him to the ground, crawling back into the ruins of the tent to take cover under the bunk. "My family," she panted, "my family are still out there–"

"I'll save them–"

"You're my family too!"

Cole paused, her words gripping him. She didn't wait to see his reaction. She plunged back into the fray, sword at the ready.

Someone was screaming nearby. Not a scream of pain, not a howl of frustration. A child's scream, thick as cud. A scream of absolute terror.

"Ivy!" Eirwen yelled. "Juniper!"

She leapt towards the noise. In the middle of the field, the queen held Ivy by her hair, a dagger pointed at her throat. Juniper was writhing in the arms of a guard a few feet away, struggling towards his sister. Bianca was surrounded, defended. No one was getting through.

Where was Onyx? Where was Garnet? There was no way anyone would have wrenched their children from them. If they weren't there, then…

No, they were just distracted, locked into fighting elsewhere. Or unconscious. Or captured. But alive. Definitely alive. Onyx was too stubborn to die. And Garnet was too nice.

Too nice like Niamh was too nice.

No. No. Not another parent, please.

"Princess!" Bianca screamed. "Give up now, or I will kill this child!"

Juniper slumped in the guard's arms, and started to whimper. Ivy continued to struggle.

"I have no quarrel with her," Bianca continued. "My soldiers will let her live. But you need to come with me."

Eirwen inched forward. Cole grabbed her arm. "No," he said. "No, you can't give up–"

"I… I have to. You know I do."

"I…" Cole looked to her, and back to Ivy. His voice fell away from him. He looked at his mother. "No," he said. "Please, Mother. Let them go."

"I will," she said, "once she surrenders to me."

He stood in Eirwen's path. "I won't let you hurt her."

His mother sighed, a long, heavy sigh. "Very well," she said. "Guards, wound the prince, but do not kill him."

"No!" Eirwen screamed. "Stop– stop all of this! I'll come with you. I will. Just don't hurt

anyone else."

She paced into the circle of guards. Someone ran up to shackle her outstretched hands. Before her, just out of reach, she spied a carriage waiting for them.

Cole ran after her. "No," he said, "No, Eirwen, *no!*"

Three guards slammed into him, pushing him to the floor. He strained against them, fighting them with all of his strength. Eirwen could almost feel his muscles grinding against her own, his every cry like a shard of glass against her heart. She could not look at him.

"Guards, be gentle with the prince," the Queen called. "I will not have him hurt."

Eirwen glared at her as a guard tugged her towards the carriage. "You and I have a very different definition of pain," she said.

Bianca's eyes were icy. "Do you really think I could hurt my own son?"

"I think you're capable of just about anything," Eirwen said coolly. "But now he knows it too."

Chapter Twenty-Two:

The Mirror Crack'd

Eirwen remembered little of the ride back to the palace. She felt like they raced the whole way there at lightning speed, charging up the mountain, as if the horses were as inhuman as the master Bianca served.

She was a fool if she thought the old creature would keep his end of the bargain. If it wasn't for what she'd done and the memories of the blood-stained snow, Eirwen could almost have felt sorry for her. The whispers she must have heard over the years…

Ivy and Juniper trembled in her arms. Bianca had shoved them in afterwards, along with four armed guards. She was riding somewhere else, presumably with Cole.

Cole.

She wasn't dead yet. She couldn't be dead. She refused to die, because she was not leaving him alone with her. That would break her far more than death. And it didn't bear thinking what it would do to him.

Dying is easy. It's the people that love you that pay the real price.

There was still time. There was still time as long as–

But was anyone coming for them? What if it wasn't just Cole she'd be leaving alone, but the twins?

"It's all right," she whispered to them desperately. "It's all going to be fine, you'll see. Trust me. Don't worry. I won't let any more bad things happen."

She was almost glad for their sobbing. It stopped them asking any questions or accusing her of lying.

Don't be dead, please don't be dead.

But even if, by some miracle, the dwarves had been spared, what of all the others who had rallied to their cause? What was the point of their selflessness? Bianca had crushed them. She had always had more power than Eirwen. She always would.

They arrived back in the palace. Hands wrenched them from the carriage, yanking them up the steps and into the throne room, throwing them on the hard, marble floor. Ivy and Juniper were dragged away from her and stuffed inside a cage to the side of the room.

A body was slumped beside it, broken almost to the point of unrecognisable. Wistal.

"A very useful source of information, that boy," said Bianca, noticing Eirwen's gaze. She moved past her, still clutching her basket of apples. "Although, to his credit, it took a while to get it from him."

The urge Eirwen had, stuffed inside that passageway, overhearing the truth of her father's murder, boiled inside her. That hard, cold rage knotted deep within. Her heart would be no good at this rate. Bianca had stained it.

I want to kill you, she realised. *I want you to hurt. I don't care what it costs me.*

Cole was thrown to the floor beside her.

"Gently with the prince, please!" his mother crooned.

Cole was not co-operating. He continued to struggle against his captors, crying Eirwen's name,

until his mother clicked her fingers and waved them towards a pillar. The guards dragged him up and tied his chains around the stone.

Eirwen could not look at him. She could not look at the twins. Her gaze drifted up to the dais.

The Mirror stood suspended over the throne, its white face gleaming. Underneath it was a glass box, the size and shape of a coffin.

"It's actually quite pretty, isn't it?" the Queen said, following Eirwen's gaze. "Do you like it? It's for you, obviously."

"A way for that thing to take my heart? What was wrong with trying to *eat it* like you did before?"

Bianca laughed. "Too messy," she said. "And my beloved Mirror assures me that this way will be much, much better for us all. A way to drain your strength and light, as well as your life. It will restore him to absolute power, and I will rule at his side."

"You really are mad, aren't you?"

Bianca glared. She placed her basket of apples to the side of the room. "I was going to offer you one of these," she said. "It'll be a lot less painful. Now I think I rather like the idea of watching you suffer."

The guards dragged her forward. Cole screamed, fighting against his shackles until his wrists almost popped out of their sockets.

"Mother, don't do this!" he screeched. "I will never forgive you if you do this."

Bianca's face softened, only for a moment. "Don't worry, dearest. Once the Mirror has imbibed her heart, he'll make it so we'll live forever. You can't be angry at me forever. You'll forgive me eventually."

"Not after this," he said. "If you kill her, I will never, *ever* forgive you. I don't want to live forever. I don't want to live at all without her."

She sighed, patting his cheek. "My poor, sweet boy. Love isn't forever. It's foolish to rely on it. Sooner or later, she'll break your heart. It's best to get it over with."

"She can have my heart," said Cole, glancing up at Eirwen. *She can have everything I have. Everything I am,* his look seemed to suggest. "But right now, you're the one breaking it."

Bianca shook her head, but something flickered in her eyes. "You'll forgive me," she insisted. She repeated the words, almost like a mantra, and the guards dragged Eirwen towards the coffin.

This could not be happening. This could not be it. Her eyes scanned about the room, searching for something, anything, that would delay this. Something she could use as a weapon if she could just get free–

But she could not.

And no one was coming.

"No." She struggled against her bonds. She was not going gently, quietly, like a good little girl. She was going to fight until the last moment, despite the iron-like grips around her arms, the shackles on her wrists.

"Eirwen!" Cole's voice was wretched. "Eirwen, *no*!"

She cried back, straining against the guards, bound hands reaching for him and he surged against his chains. *"Cole!* Cole, I'm sorry!"

There was more, there was so much more, so much more they didn't have time for–

Hinges squeaked open. Her legs were lifted from under her. She kept squirming, kept kicking, kept moving. She didn't, not for one moment, ever give up, even as her limbs were squeezed inside and the lid fastened over.

Something rose at the foot of the coffin, a faint, white mist. Ice shot up the glass. Dense, cold pain clawed at every inch of her. It was like being plunged under ice, a cold so intense it felt like fire.

She punched the pane dividing her from the world, from home, from Cole and safety and anything good, and kept screaming his name until sensation finally dribbled away.

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She woke in a field of white, devoid of feeling. There was no pain, no numbness, nothing. Just a bright, endless, unyielding white plain.

Am I dreaming?

She touched her body, praying for sensation.

Am I dead?

"Well, this is interesting." A face appeared before her, paper-white with black, empty eyes. As she focused, a shape formed from the mist, a pale and indistinct body to match the head.

"You… you're Janus," she whispered.

The face smiled. "It is good to hear that name uttered again, and with such reverence. I was beginning to think I had faded out of history entirely. But no matter. Soon I will be free of this prison… thanks to you."

"Prison?" Eirwen stood up sharply, amazed her legs could support her in this place of nothing. "Are we… inside the mirror?"

"In a manner of speaking. I wasn't expecting to see you here as I sucked the life from you…" He raised a long, smoky finger to her cheek, sighing as it made contact. "I knew forcing you to touch the sun stone was the right decision."

"What?" Coldness gripped her insides. "No, there's no way–"

"The shades answered to Jasper," Janus crooned. "And Jasper answered to me. The minute I knew you had gone Under the Mountain with the prince, when I heard you speak to that dwarf about resurrecting the sun stone… I knew I could trick you into using your own blood, that it would fuel your pure heart rather than destroy it."

"But… but I made that decision myself!"

"Of course you did. As I knew you would. Once I took out the dwarf. Once you were trapped in that room. When it looked like the only way you could save that boy–"

Eirwen shook her head. "No. No, that's not–"

"It is," he said. "And it was so very worth it. When your stepmother thought she killed you the first time, and ate that heart at my behest, and nothing happened, I just assumed I had been trapped in this place too long to be freed through that method. I was taking no chances this time. The coffin will take everything from you, including the remnant of sunlight seared to your soul. I will be more powerful than ever. A god among men. Nothing, nothing will stand in my way."

Eirwen shuddered, because she knew he was right. There was nothing she could do.

But Cole and the twins were still trapped in that room. Someone might still come for them. If she could just stall him…

He wanted to talk. He had been voiceless for centuries.

"What– what happened to you? How did a being as powerful as you ever come to be trapped in here?"

"A millenia ago, I walked this world as a god, a supreme being, but others of my kind… took

exception to how I used my powers to interfere with mortal business. They could not kill me, so they trapped me in here, rendering me *almost* powerless."

"Almost?"

"I learned that when a human asked a question of me, I could answer it– could stretch my gaze out almost anywhere in the world, as long as they asked it of me."

"But not dwarves."

The gleeful look in his eyes darkened. "No, not dwarves. And when my old enemies figured that out, they banished me to a rocky prison, deep in the centre of earth. There I remained for centuries, until Jasper found me."

"But how… how did you turn Jasper into that… *thing*?" she asked. "If dwarves are immune to your power–"

Janus smiled. "Immune from most of my power, yes, but not immune to my tongue. And Jasper didn't know I couldn't see what he asked of me. I spoke to him. He spoke back. I whispered suggestions. 'Do you ever wonder what your brother thinks of you?' 'Do you ever fear what your sister-in-law thinks you've done?' 'Should you take her out before she rises against you?' It took decades, in some cases, to convince him to take the power for himself, to persuade him he needed more, that his enemies were all around him, that if he truly wanted to protect himself…"

"He needed that monster in the deep."

Janus nodded. "A creature as old as I am. It might have lived forever if it hadn't fused itself with Jasper. He gave it the strength it needed to escape, at the time, but a dwarf's body makes a poor host for a creature of magic. It could not survive after you blasted it with light."

Whatever was left of Eirwen's heart hammered against her ribcage.

"What happened to you? After the dwarven realm fell?"

"After that idiot tried to smash me, you mean?"

Eirwen nodded.

"I spoke to a dwarf amongst the wreckage. One who didn't know what I was. I had him ask me how to get out, already knowing a safe route. He wished to thank me for saving him, so I asked him to have me reframed and given away. I whispered to every owner after to gift me to someone with power. 'How much her Ladyship would appreciate an item like me...' 'think how much the Duke would favour you if you gave him a mirror that could tell him everything…' Finally, I was gifted to the Queen of Florin, but she died before she could learn of my powers and I was left in an attic, gathering dust, until a young maid found me…"

"Bianca," Eirwen whispered, "or whatever she was called."

Janus smiled. "You know, sometimes I think even she forgets that she had another name. She has been Bianca for so long, and there's nothing to tie her to the person she once was…"

"Except her son's face."

Janus snorted. "I suppose."

Something rumbled, far away and incredibly close, like the sound of ripping paper rolled into thunder. A deep, uncomfortable feeling surged inside Eirwen's chest. She clutched it, whatever good it could do. Her fingers felt nothing. She *was* nothing. Nothing but the pain at the core of whatever she used to be.

No, no. I'm still there. I'm still in that world. I'm not dead yet. I refuse to be dead.

She thought of the homestead, of apple pies, the smell of damp hay, the hearth, the warmth of the wood underfoot, the smell of Onyx's tobacco and Oakley's herb garden. Wren's roar, Merry's pipes, Garnet's songs. She thought of staying up late under the covers with Juniper and Ivy, swapping stories

into the night.

Be safe, be safe, be safe.

She thought of Niamh tucking her into bed at night, and her father doing the same, long ago. How disappointed they would be if she gave in now.

She thought of watching Cole sleep, the first night he came to them. She thought of the last night, the way she leant against him and listened to the sound of his breathing, his beating heart, and felt like it was music she'd been kept from all her life. An organ she didn't know she had, but as necessary to her now as all the others.

You cannot have my heart. It is not yours. It is theirs. Pure, stained, mangled, perfect– whatever it is belongs to them.

To him.

A terrific crash split apart the white.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

The Apple

Cole wrapped the chains around his arms and pulled, straining with all his might, but the iron and stone did not budge.

Neither did Eirwen. She was utterly still, her immobile form slumped inside the glass container.

When she'd screamed, he thought he'd do anything to make her stop. Now she had, and that broke him far worse.

No, no, no, no!

Not like this. Not ever. Not without him.

Come back, he begged. *Don't you dare die. He can't have your heart. Take mine, take mine. Not hers. Never hers.*

Whatever good his would be to a god, he did not know, but it could take all of him if it would only spare her.

The Mirror had gone dark and silent, but now it was starting to crack. Great swathes of light poured forth. The room began to tremble and shake. One of the chandeliers split from the ceiling. A guard pushed his mother out of the way as it crashed to the floor in an explosion of glass and dust. The guard's axe went flying, skidding to the floor a few feet away.

Cole lurched for it, his fingers skimming the handle. His wrist strained against his manacle, his thumb burning. He lapsed back, examining the joint, and wondered if he could break it. If he could get one hand free, he could use the axe to break the chains binding him. Probably. Possibly.

He glanced back at Eirwen's coffin.

Hopefully.

He raised his hand and smashed it against the pillar with all the force he could muster. Pain shot through the joint and he swallowed a low scream. It wasn't enough, not quite.

"Cole!" his mother shrieked. "What are you doing?"

He did not reply.

"Stop!"

He drew back his hand.

His mother raced forwards, snatching up the axe and swinging it over his head, once, twice, three times. The chains fell away from him, and she dropped the axe to the floor.

She stared at him, half in horror, as if she didn't know this person before her.

Cole grabbed the fallen axe, and hurtled towards the coffin as light filled the room, smashing it open with the handle and ignoring the pain splitting through his hand as Eirwen pooled out of it and into his arms. He yanked her under the table as the Mirror divided, powdery shards of glass erupting through the room.

A figure stepped out of the frame. He was eight feet tall and pure white, with a muscled, slippery body clothed in a loose, sheeted garment. Long white hair spread down his back, and his eyes, no longer black, were blue and piercing. Eirwen's eyes.

Eirwen coughed in his arms, shattering the feeling in his chest. She was alive. Whatever

happened next didn't matter.

"You really have to stop saving me," she spluttered.

He kissed her forehead, relief shuddering out of him. "Never, my darling. But it's all right. You saved me first."

Eirwen raised a hand and stroked back his hair. "I don't quite know what you're talking about, but I will always save you," she said. "Always."

Janus rose to his full height, glancing back at Eirwen. "You're still alive," he snarled. "Interesting."

He raised a giant hand towards her, but a bullet cracked through the air, narrowly missing his outstretched fingers.

All turned towards the noise.

Onyx stood in the entrance, flanked by the rest of the dwarves, the Huntsman, and several rebels, all dishevelled and streaked with blood. But alive.

He reloaded his pistol. "Get away from my daughter," he growled.

Janus raised his hands to the roof and another chandelier came crashing down. Onyx dived out of the way, his forces scattering.

"Get her out!" he hissed at Cole.

Cole nodded, sweeping her into his arms. Janus raised another hand, and three guards swept across their path, weapons at the ready.

"You don't need to fight us," Cole said. "We are not the enemy. Do you really want *that* as your king over her?"

The guards hesitated, but Janus snapped his fingers, and their eyes went glassy. They lunged for Cole and he leapt out of the way, Eirwen skidding out of his arms. She crawled out of the wreckage, pulling herself up as he dodged their attacks. She wasn't fighting. She could barely move.

Wren's bolt hit one of them in the shoulder, and she, Merry and a handful of rebels raced over to cover them. Garnet made a beeline for the twins, still in their cages, fighting off anything that tried to stop her like a crazed animal. Cole tugged Eirwen back to her feet and pulled her into one of the side passages, slamming the door shut between them before sinking to the ground with her in his arms.

"We're not really going to leave them, are we?" she whispered.

"Of course not," he said. "We just need, er, some kind of plan…"

He pulled out his hand from under her, wincing.

"You're hurt."

"I er, may have broken my thumb getting out of those shackles."

"What?"

"I read about it in a book–"

"Let me see–"

"Ouch! Be careful!"

"I'm trying to help you. Don't be a baby."

"I just broke my thumb for you, woman, and *I'm* the baby?"

"If you don't let me bind it, yes!" Tears studded her eyes as she examined the broken digit. "You're an idiot," she said softly. "Don't hurt yourself for me."

He raised his good hand to her cheek. "No such promises, I'm afraid."

"Cole, I–"

There was a crash from outside. One of the pillars had been brought clean away from the ceiling. Cole peered through the gap in the concealed door, trying to ignore Eirwen stiffening beside

him.

"Are they all right?" she asked.

Cole couldn't see everyone. Merry was still weaving through the room. The cage with the twins in was empty. The crack of Onyx's pistol echoed through the air. He could see his mother by the side of the room, standing statue still, flanked by only two guards, a look of horror etched into her face.

"I think so," he said.

Eirwen tore the laced hem off her nightgown and started to bind it round Cole's hand, strapping the broken digit to the rest of the limb.

"Got a plan yet?" he asked.

"No," she said, "you?"

He shook his head.

"Let me see what's happening."

She shuffled forwards towards the panel and peered through with him. A bolt seared passed Janus' shoulder, splitting his flesh. The old god seethed, clutching at the wound.

"He can bleed," Cole gaped. "He should be immortal, right? How can he–"

But as soon as he said it, the wound started to close. Eirwen let out a sharp cry.

"What? What is it?"

She glanced up at him, her eyes wide, and peeled back the fabric covering her shoulder. A thin red line cut through the flesh, still bleeding.

"How did you–"

Eirwen scrambled for the latch. "I need a weapon."

"Of course you do."

She slipped back into the fray, sliding under one of the tables and snatching up a loose shard of glass. Cole skidded out after her. "What are you–"

She tugged the sharp edge down the back of her hand, glancing at Janus in the centre of the room. His flesh was torn too. Her eyes fixed on the wound, waiting for it to heal. It took a lot longer this time, although he barely seemed to notice it.

"We're connected," she whispered. "Whatever happened inside the coffin, we're still joined. Because he didn't manage to suck all of my life away–"

The table wrenched away from them, splintering on the wall behind. Cole seized Eirwen's hand and dived behind a pillar, the force of Janus blows slamming into the stone. Half a dozen rebels and dwarves rose up as a wall between them.

Cole glanced at Eirwen. She was panting hard, her expression glazed. How much had Janus taken from her?

Three of the rebels defending them went flying. The pillar started to crack. Cole swallowed, scouring for a weapon. His good hand was still tight in Eirwen's, but he had some strength left in him. He wasn't going down without a fight.

The pillar shook dangerously, and Eirwen wrenched him out from underneath it, spiralling to the dais at the end of the room and the standing wall behind the throne.

Something caught his feet and yanked them out from underneath him. He twisted through the air, rolling against the marble. Janus raised over him. Eirwen let out a scream.

"No!" his mother howled, racing between him and Janus. "Not my son! You promised!"

Janus stalled, grinning. There was no mercy there, no kindness. Only mild shock. "Oh, you stupid woman," he crowed. "You have served your purpose."

"But… but you said…"

"I *lied.* Every day to you, I lied. You were a means to an end. A pawn in *my* game. But you don't have to die. Move aside now."

His mother did not budge. "No," she said. "I won't. I *can't.*"

Cole turned away as his mother went flying, grabbing Eirwen and fleeing behind the wall. Eirwen's eyes were frantic.

"Come out, little princess," Janus called. "I only have a little more to take from you. Then this will all be over. I will spare your little family. A worthy bargain, don't you think?"

Shots were fired. One of them scraped Janus' cheek. Eirwen's started to bleed.

"Don't do it," Cole whispered, his voice hoarse.

She grabbed his face. "Cole," she breathed, "I love you."

"You're just saying that because you think we're going to die."

"You're an idiot," she said, "and I hate you for that almost as much as I love you for everything else."

Cole's eyes widened. "You… you mean it?"

"Yes."

Cole made a soft sound, half groan, half sigh. "I love you, too. Just in case I hadn't made that abundantly clear by now."

Eirwen grabbed his face and kissed him, pouring herself into that action, that moment, like there would never be another time.

"If this doesn't work," she said, drawing back from him, "I want you to know that. And that I'm so, so sorry."

Cole frowned. "Eira, what are you–"

She leapt out of his arms, slid across the floor to where his mother's basket had fallen, and grabbed an apple from the floor. He realised what she was going to do seconds before she did it.

There was no time to scream. She bit into it and collapsed in an instant.

His wail was lost under the roar of Janus. The creature stopped, bending over, his gaze leaping to Eirwen's still form.

"No!" he howled. "*No!* This isn't…" He threw out his arm, sending a few loose sparks spitting towards the ground. "I am a god! No mortal can… I am a *god!*"

You wanted a pure heart, thought Cole bitterly. *Live with the consequences, and break like one.*

Light erupted from the tips of Janus' fingers, followed by his wrists, his elbows, his shoulders. Light poured out of him like water through a dam. It was cracking into a thousand pieces. The light was bright, burning, slamming against every corner of the room like a flat wall of fire. Cole inched forwards, crawling through the force towards Eirwen's side.

Janus threw back his head. Light streamed through his eyes, shaking the ceiling. It brimmed through his mouth, choking him. Wider, harder, brighter.

In one last burst, it soared through the room, exploding him into shards of brittle dust.

Cole covered Eirwen's body with his own, screwing his eyes up tightly until the room stopped shaking, and the world slid back to normal.

For an age, nothing seemed to happen. A thick, monstrous quiet suspended over the room. No one spoke. No one moved.

A tiny, quiet voice. "Mama," whispered Ivy, "Why isn't Eira moving?"

There was a shuffling, the noise of someone moving through the wreckage, stopping shortly in front of Cole. He recognised the wooden leg, but the voice attached to it was inhuman.

"No," Onyx hissed. "No! Not like this, girl. Not before me. Get up! Get up, *please*..."

Cole unfolded himself from around her, and cradled her against his chest. Onyx sank to the floor beside him, thick tears trembling down his whiskers. He made no move to take her from him.

Cole had never seen anything lifeless look so perfect. It was hard to believe she was gone at all. Death had no hold on her. Even it knew she was too good for a world of darkness.

You cannot be gone, he thought. "Eira," he whispered. "If you need a heart, you can have mine. Half of it, all of it, I don't care. But don't leave me here alone. You've always been kind to me, even when I didn't deserve it. Be kind to me again. Save me from life without you. Come back to me, Snow. I'm not done with annoying you. I'm not done with loving you. I'm not done being a better person because I know you. I'll be a shadow without you."

She remained mute, her parted lips speechless and empty. A wild, desperate anger rose inside him, cold and hot and worse than anything he had ever felt before, an agony dragged from the depths of pain and grief.

"Don't expect your death to morph me into a better person!" he said, shaking her. "I'm not that good. I've never been that good. Not without you. I need you here with me for that. If you don't come back, I'll be the monster you knew before. I'll be awful and cruel and unkind, I swear it. I swear it. I will be… I can't be… without… without you." He choked, his throat burning. "Come back, come back, please. *Please,* Snow." He wiped back her hair. She was still and pale, as unresponsive as a statue. But she was still warm and soft in his arms. She could not be gone. The world was not that cruel.

He brought her against his chest and rocked her, calling her name with a last few frantic pleas. He could barely feel the words on his lips, barely feeling anything but the thin weight of her against him.

"I love you," he said. "I love you."

He kissed her lips.

He would not let her go. He would stay here with her until he was a corpse himself. He didn't care if it was selfish, it was the last thing she would have wanted. He was not letting her splinter from his side, not forever, not like this. She had gone and he would follow. Life without her would be worse than purgatory, worse than whatever could come after. A fragile and watery imitation of survival.

Perhaps he was already dying. Perhaps his heart had truly broken and he was vanishing from the world too. Her cheeks appeared flushed with life. He thought she was breathing, her eyelids fluttering as though in a dream.

They flickered open, bright, blue, glassy. As clear and hopeful as a spring morning. Her smile broke every shadow that had ever existed in the cold, stormy winter of his heart.

Fingers raised towards his trembling cheeks. "I knew you could save me," she said.

Cole still didn't believe any of it was happening until, across the room, Garnet burst into noisy sobs of delight. "My baby," she cried, clinging to her other children with huge, shuddering sighs of relief. "She's all right, we're all right, we're fine."

A lump dislodged itself from Cole's throat, like a stone rolling away. "You're… you're here."

Eirwen nodded, pressing her forehead to his. "And I'm not going anywhere again."

Chapter Twenty-Four:

Queen of the Kingdom

All at once, a dozen bodies surrounded them, pulling her out of Cole's arms and into theirs. She wept into Garnet's shoulder as the twins pawed at her waist.

"I thought you were dead."

"We're hardier than that, pet," said Onyx, stroking her hair. "As are you, apparently."

"I told you she was a dwarf at heart," said Wren, helping the Huntsman to his feet, "maybe she'll live forever after all."

Oakley prised her from Garnet's arms and glanced at the now-healed cut on her cheek. Somehow, detaching herself from Janus had healed her. A strange, whispery energy filled her veins. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she rushed. "But Cole–"

She glanced back at him, sitting behind her. He hadn't moved in several minutes.

"I'm fine," he shrugged.

"His hand's broken."

"So, not fine then," said Oakley, seizing his wrist. "Come on, lad, no heroes here."

Eirwen climbed to her feet. Bianca lay in a pile at the corner of the room, still moving, still conscious. A few knights crouched gingerly around her, unsure of where to put themselves.

"A sword," Eirwen looked at the Huntsman, "I need one."

He handed her his own. She marched over there, flanked by half of her family, and approached her cowering form. The guards stiffened as she raised her sword to Bianca's throat.

"Do you surrender?"

Bianca's eyes darted over the ruin and destruction, past the smashed coffin, the throne. They settled on Cole. She lowered her head. "I surrender," she said, and plucked the crown from her head. She tossed it to the ground.

Eirwen stared at it. She'd never given much thought to the item before, an elaborate thick band of woven silver, the same one her father wore. Her fingers twitched, and she was a little afraid to touch it.

Ivy ran forward and scooped it off the ground. She held it up. Eirwen knelt before her, fighting to keep her knees steady as it dropped onto her head, and the weight of it settled there. She stood back up, sweeping towards the dais.

She stopped before the throne.

"Bianca of Florin, or whatever your true name is, the Crown finds you guilty of treason, and sentences you to life imprisonment. Have you anything to say?"

The former queen looked up at her. "No, Your Majesty."

"Huntsman, Wren, please escort her to the dungeons. Make sure she is cared for, and any injuries attended to. I want her to live a long life, alone with her thoughts."

The Huntsman hauled her to her feet. She did not struggle.

Eirwen turned her attention to the guards. "I know the former queen had power over you, and pardon you thus for any actions you took against me during her reign. But I cannot have anyone so

easily bent serve under me. You are dismissed from your posts, effective immediately. Is that understood?"

The knights scrambled to their feet, bowing awkwardly, mumbling words of apology as they hobbled and scuffled for the door. A few remained, too injured or too dead to move. Eirwen motioned for others to attend them, and sank exhausted into the throne.

Her family stood before her.

"You did well, pet," said Onyx. "Clear. Nicely spoken."

"If you say so…" She looked around at the wreckage, the blood, the bodies. The room was probably the least of her worries. But it was a start.

"Someone locate the servants and have this mess cleared. And… a builder? Actually, this room is probably not structurally sound, we should move elsewhere. And maybe we should eat?"

Garnet laughed. "I'll take care of all of that, love. But I think maybe you should go and put on some clothes?"

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Somehow, Eirwen made it up to one of the guest rooms and located some spare clothes. None of them looked like the sort of thing she'd be expected to wear from now on, but she didn't feel like raiding Bianca's own wardrobe just yet. Hopefully the crown was embellishment enough for now, she thought as she wrestled into a light blue gown. At least it was in the royal colour.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in?"

Cole marched into the room, still dishevelled, his arm in a sling. "Hi," he said breathlessly.

"Hi," said Eirwen back. "I… I'm not properly dressed."

There was no snort of laughter about how she'd been walking around in her nightclothes all day, or about how he'd seen a great deal more last night.

"How did you know that would work?" he demanded, his eyes dark and solid.

"What?"

"You said you knew I could save you. How did you know?"

"Oh," she said quietly, "I knew that whatever your mother had laced the apple with, it was some magical concoction. I thought I saw something on the walls in the Underground. A lover reviving someone from a curse of sleeping death."

"A lover?" he raised an eyebrow. "How did you know that?"

"The, er, the writing, implied it."

He inched closer. "What did the writing say?"

"That… that… that true love's kiss would break the spell," she mumbled.

"True love, huh?" Cole grinned. "You risked your life on that?"

"I *would* have risked my life on that," she said. "If I had had absolutely no other option. It was the right thing to do. To save everyone. But… but I didn't think I *was* risking my life. I wouldn't want to do that, because..."

"Because…?"

"Fool," she whispered crossly, "because of you. Because I don't want to leave you alone–"

Cole's mouth crushed against hers, his free arm wrapping around her back. The weight of a thousand different thoughts and fears was pressed into that kiss, of things he wanted to express but

couldn't, was overwhelmed by. Eirwen knew. She felt the same.

She pulled back gently, dizzy with his kisses, and played with the folds of his clothes as she steadied her breath. "I think that's why the coffin couldn't drain me, not completely," she continued, summoning her courage. "I couldn't give Janus my heart. It was already yours. It was always yours. It will remain yours forever, if you–"

There was another knock on the door. "Eirwen?" Ivy's voice. "Mama wants to know if you're ready? The servants are a bit perplexed and will want to speak to you."

Eirwen sighed, and slipped her arm into Cole's. "No rest for the wicked, apparently. Shall we?"

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The list of tasks involved with taking over of a kingdom was borderline ridiculous. Eirwen spent the next week being marched from one meeting to the next, talking to various advisors, greeting the people, re-negotiating deals with surrounding countries, examining budgets, and appointing new guards from the surviving rebels. She quickly installed Onyx as her chief advisor, Wren as the new captain, Oakley as the royal physician, Merry as the chief builder and Garnet as the housekeeper, keeping most of the old staff in the meantime.

"Are… are you sure you're all right? To live here for a bit? The cottage–"

"Will still be there when you've found your feet," Onyx assured her. "Don't worry about us. We've got your back."

Eirwen was glad, because the thought of doing any of this without them was quite frankly terrifying.

She had seen very little of Cole during this time, being swamped with responsibilities. He was always there at mealtimes, stealing quick kisses in the corridor, but she was usually so exhausted by the time that night rolled around that she fell into bed without thinking of calling for him.

She still wished he'd come, though. They had much to discuss.

The Huntsman had been serving as her personal guard in lieu of trusting any of the new ones quite enough, but she hadn't discussed with him whether or not he wanted to make the position permanent. She asked him about it one day as he escorted her to yet another meeting.

"I'm hoping to have no need of an executioner," she said. "So what would you *like* to do?"

The Huntsman smiled. "Raise horses, marry Wren, and maybe have a couple of children, if we're able, and she's willing."

The grin spread through Eirwen's cheeks. "Then stablemaster you shall be," she declared. "The rest is up to you."

He bowed to her, and edged out of the room.

"Huntsman?"

"Yes?"

"What's your name?"

He laughed. "Robert Hunter," he said. "The occupation fit the name."

"Well then, Stablemaster Hunter, I bid you good day."

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It was a week before Cole finally drummed up the courage to visit his mother. He'd been assured she was being taken care of and had actually been something of the model prisoner. He worried if that meant she was trying something, and what it said about them that that was his first thought.

It had been a strange week. He'd wanted to assist with the rebuilding, but with his hand there was a limit to the help he could offer. He'd wandered from place to place and station to station, escorting the twins home to pack up the cottage and bring back the animals, ordering provisions for the wounded, writing to the families of the dead and injured. He tried to keep himself busy and ignore how wrapped up and away from him Snow was right now.

A part of him thought he'd imagined the whole thing between them, how focused and professional she was when others were around. But every fleeting moment in the corridor before breakfast, every swift kiss when no one was watching, reminded him of what they were. He just had to be patient. She was running a country, after all.

He made his way into the dungeon to the cell at the end of the room. It was clean and nicely-furnished. Eirwen had made good on her promise that she was, at least, made comfortable.

And alone.

She sat at her desk, a book open on her lap, staring out at the narrow scrap of sky afforded to her by the high, narrow window. She was perfectly poised, looking like she had done a hundred times before when he'd found her reading. For a moment, the bars seemed to fade away around her.

He coughed quietly. "Mother."

She wheeled around, standing sharply. The book fell away from her. "Cole." She stepped towards him. "Are you well? Your hand–"

He tugged down his sleeve. "I'm assured it will be fine in a few weeks. No damage done."

"Good. That's good." She looked down at her feet. "I… I never would have hurt you. If I'd known–"

"But you *did* hurt me, Mother. I'm not talking about broken bones. Eirwen almost died. I don't think the weight of the moment where I thought I'd lost her will ever truly leave me."

"I didn't… I didn't know how you really felt about her."

"You didn't care to. And in the end, it didn't matter. You would have killed the woman I love for your own selfish gains. Don't tell me it was for me. I was just another part of the future you wanted for yourself."

She fell silent.

"You loved Olwen, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "It didn't start off that way. It was just for power, at first, because the Mirror… because Janus said it would be a good match. I know, now, that he was just trying to get closer to the mountains. But when I came here, he was so good, and so kind to me, I couldn't help but grow to love him. And when he didn't love me–"

"Do you regret killing him?"

His mother's eyes turned glassy. "Almost every single day."

For a moment, Cole allowed himself to wonder what life would have been like if Olwen hadn't died, if they'd had a chance to be a proper family. He couldn't picture it. He couldn't picture his mother being content with a man who did not love her, and he certainly couldn't imagine Eirwen becoming more like a sister. No, that kind of happy family had never been within his reach.

But maybe one day, with Eirwen, that kind of happiness could be his.

"And what about… what about the real Bianca?" *Do you regret the start of this all? Would*

you change the path your life took, if you could?

His mother hesitated, and then slowly shook her head. "It brought me you."

A lump formed in Cole's throat. He did not trouble to ask about his own father. He already knew what the answer would be.

He turned sharply towards the door.

"Wait–" A hand shot out through the bars, a hand he did not recognise, olive-skinned, slender-fingered. A ring sat in the centre of its palm. "She never took it," said a voice he barely knew. Half his mother's. Half another's. "She said I was welcome to keep whatever face I wanted; I would never be going anywhere again. But I don't want it. Not anymore. I think it's time to let the facade fall."

Cole swallowed, hardly daring to move. "Your name," he said, his voice no louder than a whisper, "your real one. What is it?"

"Demetria," she said softly, as if the sound of it shocked her. "I haven't spoken it in twenty years."

"It's pretty." He turned around. In his mother's dress was another person, taller and skinnier, with a bolt of dark, greying hair. Her face was thin and slightly worn. Pitch-black eyes shadowed sharp cheekbones. She looked warmer than Bianca, and it was not hard to imagine this half-stranger rocking him to sleep at night.

For the first time, Cole looked into his mother's face.

"How do I look?" she asked.

He sighed. "Like me," he said. "You look like me."

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Eirwen was waiting for him in the courtyard, bundled up against the cold, the crown shining against her dark hair. Her breath iced in the air as she rushed to his side. He didn't know she'd been waiting for him, but the awkward coil of emotions tangled inside him eased just a little in her presence.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Not sure I can put it into words."

She threaded her fingers into his and squeezed. "Will you be all right?"

"It's… it will take a while. But I'm getting there."

Eirwen leaned against him, her warmth spreading through his arm. "I'm glad she's alive."

"You can't mean that."

"For you, I'm glad she's alive."

"You're too good, Snow."

They walked on together through the frozen gardens, their feet shuffling through the padded snow. Cole had an urge to pull her onto the lawns and throw her down in the powdery piles and kiss her until they were giddy, but it had been a while since they'd had time to be alone together, and he was conscious of all the eyes around them now.

Suddenly, he decided he didn't care. He slid his arm around her waist and heaved her against him, throwing them back into the mounds and rolling on top of her. Eirwen squeaked, giggling, and threw her arms around his neck. Her smile was infectious, and he tugged on it with his lips.

"What was that for?" She laughed.

He brushed loose snowflakes from her brow. "Because I love you and despite now living under

the same roof, I've missed you these last few days."

"You haven't… you haven't been to my room."

Cole paused. "I must have passed your door a dozen times, thinking about knocking. I wasn't sure you wanted me to."

"Well," said Snow stiffly, "I did."

Cole grinned. "Duly noted. I'll come by tonight."

She kissed him, long and hard. "Please don't think I ever don't want you," she said. "Also, I love you too. I should probably get used to saying that, right?"

Cole's mouth slipped once more to her lips.

There was a polite cough behind them.

"While I really *do* hate to interrupt," said Marie, "there are some matters that require your attention, My Queen."

Marie had arrived three days ago and had appointed herself as something like a lady-in-waiting. Cole wasn't entirely sure what the position entailed as she still seemed to spend most of her time in the library, but there was a great deal of gossip and giggling whenever his back was turned.

Cole shuffled to his feet, helping Eirwen up after. They brushed themselves down. "Meet me in the music room when you've finished," he said, kissing her cheek.

"I will."

His heart thumped with the thought.

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Eirwen finished the meeting in record time, making swift and purposeful decisions on every item on the agenda. Onyx smiled approvingly. She only pinned two topics for a later discussion… one of which involved Cole's role in the castle now. A lot of people were unhappy that he remained a guest of the Crown's, unsure as to his involvement with his mother's machinations. There were a lot of suggestions as to how best to deal with that, some of which she was much more inclined towards than others.

But he would be the one to decide, and she would try and respect it, whatever it was.

He won't want to go back to Florin, will he? She prayed. *Not now. Not after all this.*

She made her way to the music room. Cole sat at the piano, tapping out a slightly clunky tune. Despite the misplaced notes, it had a beautiful melody, though it slid from dark and powerful to light and airy rather abruptly.

"Interesting song," she said, appearing at his elbow. "It's beautiful. But also… a little terrifying."

"Thank you. It's a work in progress. I call it 'March of the Snowdrops.'"

"Isn't it a little difficult to play with a broken thumb?"

"I am managing. Not well, but I'm managing." He paused. "Do you want to tell me what's on your mind? I've no idea what it is, but I know it's something."

"Oh," she said. "Right. Of course. So… so there's a couple of things. Not… not sure which I should do first. Well, I've been thinking about something. Actually, I wanted to discuss it with you."

A soft smile played in the corner of Cole's lips. "What is it, then?"

She took a quick breath. "I think I want to dissolve the monarchy."

"What? After all *that?*"

"*Because* of all that. Because no one should ever wield that kind of power. Because I…"

"Don't want to be like my mother, you mean?"

"Or my father."

"You won't be."

"Maybe I won't. Maybe all that I've seen and done will shape me into the best ruler this country's ever seen. But what about who comes next? Perhaps I'll be able to install good values in my children, if I have them. Perhaps I won't. But at some point, someone will come along who gets it wrong. People shouldn't have to die to remove them."

"You've… you've thought about this a lot."

She nodded. "Pretty much the entire time we've been fighting. I won't do it immediately, of course. The country needs stability for a few years. I need the dissolution of the monarchy to be slow. It could be decades before I hand over the reins entirely, but I won't die a queen."

Cole smiled. "You'll always be a queen to me."

Eirwen glanced down, flustered by the intensity of his gaze. "That… that brings me to my next point. People… people want to know what you'll do next. *I* want to know what you *want* to do next. Will… will you go back to Florin?"

Cole sighed. "I suppose I should. It is my country after all. I should probably see how it's getting on. Be a responsible king, and all. Maybe I'll dissolve the monarchy too. I never much fancied the responsibility."

"Do you… do you want to go back?"

"No," he said, pausing in his practise, "but–"

"Don't go back," Eirwen rushed, desperately pushing out all the other words, all the other things she'd dreaded and wondered about for days. "Stay here with me. Rule with me. I'm not much of a smooth talker and you really are. I've half forgotten how court works and I'm terrified of doing it alone. I need your help. I *want* your help. And… and I want you. All of you. In every way it's possible to want a person."

Cole stared at her, as if he were having to unwind all of her words. "Are you… proposing to me?"

"Yes, very badly, apparently." She twisted her fingers. "If you don't want to, I understand, but… please don't go. That makes me sound really silly and foolish, doesn't it? I don't like it, you know, how much I love you. Hating you was infinitely easier. I hate how I feel when you're splintered from my side, I hate how much I've come to rely on you, how much the thought of you leaving makes me want to weep–"

"You think it's any different for me? I thought I'd lost you. The thought of going anywhere without you ever again terrifies me almost as much as that moment. But I'd endure it. As long as you're alive and happy, I'd endure anything."

"But I wouldn't be happy, without you."

"You… you really mean it?"

"Of course. I love you, Cole. I wish *I* were a poet, maybe then I could word it better. If I felt less it might be easier to speak it, but I feel like my bones would shatter before I could utter the words. I love you. Irreversibly. I died once, loving you. I'll die loving you again. So marry me. Please–"

Cole cut her off, grabbing her arms and slamming his mouth against hers. They were both trembling when they parted, lips numb from kissing. "You mean it?"

"Of course, of *course* I do, you silly fool!"

“When? You’re going to have to tell me when.”

“When what?”

“When did you fall in love with me?”

Eirwen smiled. “A little before we fell asleep in each other’s arms, and more after. I knew I didn’t want to let you go, terrified as I was, and I woke up missing you in the morning.”

Cole swept back her hair, grinning. “I was captivated by you from the minute I saw you in the underground. I was half surprised to recognise you, you looked so otherworldly. But I think when you stitched up my wounds was when I really started to feel it, when we sang together, and then when we lost Niamh… I hated being apart from you. Every second after felt like ice.” He caught her fingers. “I wanted to crawl to your side. I told myself it was just because you were you, that you knew her too, that we could comfort each other… but the truth is I just wanted you.” He kissed her lightly. “You are the greatest warmth I’ve ever known. Every awful thing is lessened when you’re around.”

Eirwen kissed his fingers, then sat up and slipped onto his lap, pressing her head against his shoulder. “Once you stopped being one of the awful things, your presence had a similar effect,” she said.

“Oh, very funny.”

“Is that a yes, by the way?”

“What?”

“If you make me say it again, I’ll punch you.”

Cole frowned. “Oh,” he said, his eyes widening with realisation, “oh gosh, yes! Absolutely. I will marry you, Snow. Without a moment’s pause.”

“Good,” she said, and lifted her chin to kiss him. “Would you like it before or after the coronation?”

“Am I allowed to visit your chambers before the wedding?”

“Yes.”

Cole grinned wickedly, lifting her up and dropping her against the keys with a resounding thunk. He kissed her neck and uttered words certain to induce matrimonial harmony for years to come. “Then whatever you like, darling,” he murmured, “but my preference is still as soon as possible. I want to be able to call you my wife.”

“Snow,” she whispered, his kisses hot against her. “Call me Snow.”

Epilogue

She was crowned the week after her eighteenth birthday, a hastily-arranged, unceremonious coronation, with very little in the way of pomp or tomfoolery. Her advisors were keen to get it done as soon as possible, and she was keen to avoid an expensive fanfare reminiscent of Bianca's days.

There would be parties at some point. Perhaps for the wedding. But not while food was still scarce and she was working on adjusting the tax rate for the nobles, ensuring none bled their subjects to line their own purses.

The citizens of Aberthor danced all night, but Eirwen retired early to her chambers and spent half the next morning in Cole's arms while he made hideously embarrassing comments at the maids that came to rouse them.

"I hate you," she groaned.

"You do not, and well we both know it."

Onyx banged on the door, and he fell out of bed.

Despite the frosty beginning, Onyx did eventually warm up to Cole, moving from, "Eira could have picked worse," to "you are a tolerable son-in-law" to "you're a good father" which made Cole tear up although he never admitted it to anyone but Eirwen.

"I was so worried I would mess that part up."

Eirwen smiled, resisting the urge to tell him there was still time, and cupped his face in her hands. "I know," she said, "but there was never any doubt in my mind."

To say that Cole adored his children would be an understatement. The words did not exist to express the utmost devotion he had towards them, from the moment his firstborn –Niamh, of course– was placed in his arms. His visits to his mother had been few before her birth, but they grew in frequency afterwards. Although she never filled the role of grandmother –a position amply filled by Garnet– she was eventually permitted to meet Niamh, and the next two that followed, Opal and Jet.

Soon after, Eirwen had her moved to a house in the country, where she could live out the remainder of her years in something like peace. It was not in Eirwen's nature to bear grudges, but sometimes she still felt the shadow of her presence in Cole, the invisible longing for the mother he thought he had.

They split their time between Aberthor and Florin, a country Eirwen came to adore, conceding that the beauty of the lush green land rivalled that of her cold, pristine realm. They prepared both for the eventual dissolution of the monarchy, but were such excellent governors that they were persuaded to remain for an additional ten years.

After Eirwen finally abdicated, Onyx began the process of reuniting the dwarves and restoring the kingdoms Under the Mountain. Eirwen, Cole and their children were of course frequent visitors. They belonged everywhere. In the city, in the palace, in Florin, Under the Mountain. Home truly was whenever they were welcomed, although their main residence became a large, purpose-built cottage in the woods, designed with exceptionally tall ceilings at Cole's behest.

Marie rarely left the palace, even after they did, serving as court librarian and writing sordid romances on the side, a few of which were a little too close to real life in places. She did occasionally travel and spent some time in the Underground for a change of scenery and to inspire new ideas. The dwarves adopted her as readily as they did Eirwen.

The Huntsman and Wren moved back to the homestead and raised horses alongside their children, coming over every other weekend to reminisce about old times, every dark memory

eclipsed by the hundreds of happy occasions between.

Eirwen still told Cole she hated him more often than she told him she loved him, but as she only meant it a tiny fraction of the time, and showed her affection in a thousand other ways, Cole took it.

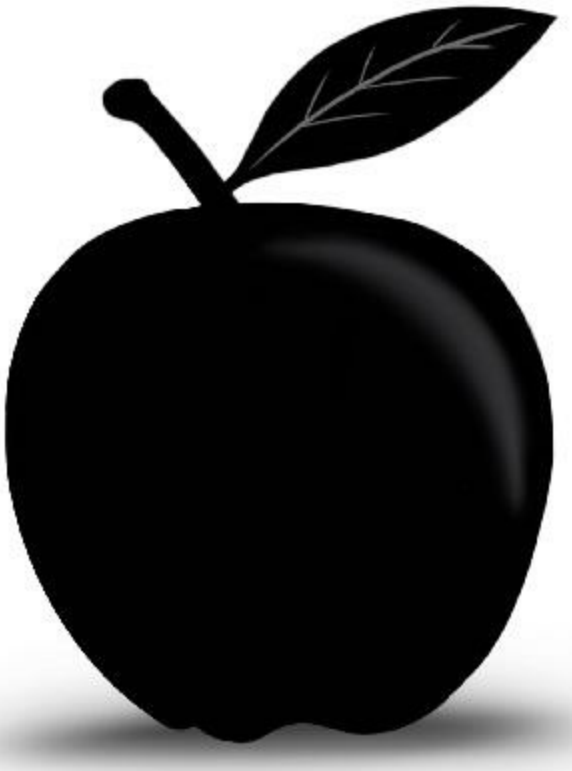
"I could spend the rest of my life teasing you quite happily," he told her one evening in late summer, as they sought a moment's peace from the children.

Eirwen grinned, and kissed him as though they were still young and silly and Onyx would be hammering down the door at any minute. "I thought that was the plan?"

And so they lived happily ever after.

Most of the time.

The End



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And, of course, thank you to my readers. I hope to entertain you with many more retellings packed with witty banter, fierce heroines, and gentle love interests, for many years to come!

Other Books by this Author:

The Phoenix Project Trilogy:

Book I: Flight
Book II: Resurrection
Book III: Rebirth

In the "Fairy Tale Retellings" series:

The Rose and the Thorn: A Beauty and the Beast Retelling
Kingdom of Thorns: A Sleeping Beauty Retelling The Barnyard Princess: A Frog Prince Retelling

Coming Soon:

A Song of Sea and Shore: A Little Mermaid Retelling

About The Author

Katherine Macdonald



Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine "Kate" Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as "the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood".

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and seven years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there's a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She lives in Kent with her manic toddler and two cats: Admiral Roe and Captain Haddock.

Her debut novel, "The Rose and the Thorn" was released in 2019. A pseudo-prequel, "Kingdom of Thorns" was released in August 2020. "A Tale of Ice and Snow" is set in the same universe as these two, long, long after.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor.